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The moon will burn and the sun go cold; dark will rise over light, before all is lost to silence. The ancient Wheel screams in its turning.

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

PROLOGUE: Darkening Threads



As she often did in the World of Dreams, Elayne Trakand wore a gown suitable for her mother's court, green silk embroidered in gold around the neck, with a necklace and bracelets of gold links and moonstones. She was only slightly surprised to discover that her companion, Nynaeve, had on something not very different, though her hair was in a brown braid instead of loose about her shoulders. Her gown was pale blue and silver, and daringly low the front. The single firedrop on its silver chain that gleamed between her breasts rather drew the eye. Elayne sniffed. Nynaeve was a great one for touting the virtues of "good Theren wools" but rarely missed a chance to dress herself up. She made no more comment that that, though. The woman's temper could be a trial at the best of times, and she did not want to have to struggle with it tonight. Instead, they waited in silence for the others to appear for their weekly meeting and exchange of information in *Tel'aran'rhiod's* Heart of the Stone.

They did not have to wait long. Relief mingled with alarm in her heart when the Wise Ones finally winked into being. No-one had shown up the week before, so it was a relief to see that the women, at least, were well, if uncommonly many, but the absence of the only man permitted to attend quickened her heart.

"Both of you?" the Wise One leader, Amys said. She and the others stood on the other side of *Callandor*.

Nynaeve spoke before she could, and not to explain. "Where is Rand? Is he hurt?"

"He's fine," Dani, their fellow Accepted, answered. "He was lazing around in the Sun Palace the last I saw him. I set Raine to, uh, keep him busy. Getting him to stay out of *Tel'aran'rhiod* is proving difficult. He's as stubborn as a rock."

The implications set a fire in Elayne's cheeks, though only in hers. The women with Dani—many of whom she did not recognise, and why had they brought so many dreamwalkers this time?—the Aiel women might think there nothing unremarkable about sharing one's lover but in Andor it would have been a great scandal. Dani herself didn't look very discomfited, for that matter. She had taken to wearing the same garb as the Wise Ones she was apprenticed to, a loose white blouse with thick dark skirts, and a scarf tied around her head. It looked a bit odd, given that she was darker of hair and skin than even the most tanned Aiel.

Elayne had a more pressing concern than lapsing proprieties, however. "Why does Rand need to stay out of *Tel'aran'rhiod* now? Have the dangers increased in some way?"

"The Shadowsouled stalk the dream," Amys said. She sounded calm, but the women with her kept a watchful eye on the dark spaces between the thick redstone columns.

"She means the Forsaken. Lanfear attacked me here, and killed Seana," Dani said, doing a passable imitation of Amys' calm.

Elayne could not share it. "Lanfear! She ... she said things about Rand, in the message she had Berelain carry." She had said he was hers, and that she would come to claim him someday. The thought infuriated her, and replaced the dress she'd been wearing with gilded armour. Yet hard on its heels came despair, for how was she to stop Lanfear if she tried? The woman's strength in the Power was legendary.

Dani nodded. "She said even more here. It's why we shouldn't be meeting like this. And why Rand definitely shouldn't be using *Tel'aran'rhiod*."

Nynaeve had a stranglehold on her dark braid. "That woolheaded oaf! It wouldn't even be worth your while trying to explain that to him. He'd start thinking with the hair on his chest and probably start dreaming himself here every night, just to prove he wasn't afraid."

"Rand's chest isn't hairy," Dani said, confused.

"You know what I mean!" Nynaeve snapped.

Elayne was busy wondering when and why Dani had seen Rand shirtless. She hoped nothing untoward had happened. Matters between them were complicated enough as it was.

“Foolish girls!” The Wise One Melaine was glaring at all three of them. “Finish your business quickly, and know that you will not meet here again until we allow it.”

Nynaeve’s eyes narrowed darkly. “Allow it? I do not answer to you, woman! If I decided to come here every night, it would be none of your business!” The looks she got from the other Wise Ones were not charitable, but Nynaeve managed not to notice. She was good at not noticing things like that.

Elayne spoke before the other women could explode at each other. “Lanfear isn’t the only danger here. Moghedien stalks *Tel’aran’rhiod* as well. Nynaeve defeated her in Tanchico but she escaped and has been hunting us ever since. She killed Ronelle and Katsui.” That won the Thenerer a few reluctant nods, ones that mollified her a little.

“It isn’t just Moghedien. I’ve seen others; they were plotting against Rand,” Nynaeve said over Dani’s curses. “They want him to attack Sammael so they can strike at his back while he’s engaged with him. Warn him, Dani, before he does something stupid.”

Dani wetted her lips. “Sammael. He was at Cairhien during the battle. Yes. I’ll warn him. Who else was involved? Do you know?”

“Rahvin, Graendal, Balthamel. And Lanfear.”

The Domani shivered. “Her again.”

“The world grows more dangerous by the day,” Elayne sighed. “I miss the days when it was just Whitecloaks we had to worry about, and not the Forsaken and the Seanchan, and who knows what else.”

“Oh! Speaking of Seanchan, Rand captured one of them,” Dani said. Elayne’s jaw dropped, and dropped further as she went on. “I don’t know how, and he won’t tell me. She just appeared among the tents one day while we were marching to Cairhien. He said he wanted to interrogate her, but has barely spoken to her since.”

“Men,” Elayne and Nynaeve said in unison.

“I do not understand this interest in the Seanchan.” Amys said the name awkwardly; she had never heard it until Elayne spoke it at a previous meeting. “What they do is terrible, but they are gone. Rand al’Thor defeated them, and they fled.”

Elayne turned her back and stared at the huge polished columns running off into shadow. “Gone is not to say they will never come back.” She did not want them to see her face, not even Nynaeve. “We must know whatever we can learn, in case they ever return.” They had put an *a’dam* on her in Falme. They had meant to send her over the Aryth Ocean to Seanchan, to spend the rest of her life as a dog on a leash. Fury welled up in her every time she thought of them. And fear, too. The fear that if they *did* return, they would succeed in taking and holding her this time. That was what she could not allow them to see. The stark terror that she knew was in her eyes.

Nynaeve put a hand on her arm. “We will be ready for them if they do come back,” she said gently. “They will not catch us by surprise again.” Elayne patted her hand, though she wanted to clutch it. “What else has happened?”

“Rand and the Aiel have won a great victory at Cairhien,” said Dani. Out it all came in a torrent, from Sammael to the Seanchan spearhead.

“Mat killed Couladin?” Nynaeve exclaimed at one point. It did not sound like Mat at all. Leading soldiers? Mat?

“Is Rand well?” Elayne said weakly.

“As well as can be expected,” Amys said. “He drives himself hard, and listens to no-one. Except Moiraine.” Amys was not pleased. Elayne did not know much about Aiel, but she suspected that if Amys said “hard”, anyone else would say “murderously”.

“Aviendha is with him almost all the time,” Dani said carefully. “She is taking good care of him for you.”

“Then why is she letting him push himself? What is he doing?” Quite a bit, it turned out, and clearly too much. Two hours each day practicing the sword with Lan or anyone else he could find. That made Amys’ mouth tighten sourly. Two more studying the Aiel way of fighting without weapons. Elayne did not find that strange, for she was all too aware of how helpless you could be when you could not channel. Still, Rand certainly should never find himself in that position. He had become a king, or something more, surrounded by *Far Dareis Mai* guards, ordering lords and ladies about. In fact, he spent so much time ordering them, and chasing after them to make sure they did what he said,

that he would not spare time for meals if the Maidens did not bring him food wherever he was. For some reason, while that seemed to irk Dani almost as much as it did Elayne, Amys looked distinctly amused, though her face went back to Aiel stoniness once she saw Elayne notice. Yet another hour each day was given to a strange school he had founded, inviting not only scholars but craftsmen, from some fellow who made looking glasses to a woman who had constructed some sort of huge crossbow with pulleys that could hurl a spear a mile. He had told no-one his purpose there, except maybe Moiraine, but the only answer the Aes Sedai had given Dani was that the urge to leave something behind was strong in everyone. Moiraine did not seem to care what Rand did.

“What remains of the Shaido are retreating north,” Amys said grimly, “and more slip across the Dragonwall to them every day, but Rand al’Thor seems to have forgotten them. He is sending the spears south, toward Tear. Half are gone already. Rhuarc says he has not even told the chiefs why, and I do not think Rhuarc would lie to me. Moiraine stands closer to Rand al’Thor than any except Aviendha, yet she refuses to ask him.” Shaking her head, she muttered, “Though in her defence, I will say that even Aviendha has learned nothing.”

“The best way to keep a secret is to tell no-one,” Elayne told her, which earned her a hard stare. Amys was not far behind Bair when it came to stares that made you shift your feet.

“We aren’t going to reason it out here,” Nynaeve said.

“True. What news on your end?” Dani asked.

Elayne drew a breath. There was so much to tell. And so much not to. She claimed Nynaeve had followed Lanfear to the meeting between the Forsaken, and spoke only of seeing Moghedien spying. Birgitte had not released them from their promise of secrecy. Of course, that meant not telling about Birgitte at all, that she was with them.

When she finished—with Salidar—Amys said quietly, “You are certain they will support the *Car’a’carn*?”

“They must know the Prophecies of the Dragon as well as Elaida,” Elayne said. “The best way to oppose her is to attach themselves to Rand, and make it clear to the world that they intend to support him all the way to Tarmon Gai’don.” Not the slightest quaver in her voice betrayed that she was not speaking of an absolute stranger. “Otherwise, they are just rebels, with no claim to legitimacy. They need him at least as much as he needs them.”

Amys nodded, but not as if she was ready to agree yet. “If you have told everything ...” Amys paused while Nynaeve and Elayne hurriedly said that they had. The woman’s blue eyes were incredibly penetrating. “Then we must go. I will admit there is more to be gained from these meetings than I first supposed, but I have much to do yet tonight.”

“Where are you now?” Dani asked, but then immediately shook her head. “Never mind. I shouldn’t have asked. If there’s even a chance they are watching, say nothing.”

“It is more than a chance,” Amys said quietly. “Wake, the three of you. And do not think to run off and meddle behind our backs.”

Nynaeve glared at her, but Elayne took her hand and pulled it away from her braid. The danger was very real. “We won’t. Can you contact us again when it is safe?”

“If it ever is,” Dani muttered.

* * *

The so-called Aiel were the last ones to wink out of *Tel’aran’rhiod*. Moghedien supposed they imagined themselves a rear guard. Fools. She had no doubt she could have killed any of them, but all at once? It would have been a risk, and she hated risks. Risks were for fools. Smart women were sensibly prudent, and the proud fools called them cowards for it. How many such fools had she brought down in the War of Power, from the shadows, unseen, or if seen, ignored because she could not possibly be a threat? There was always a way for those who were cautious, while those fell who called caution cowardice. She herself had carried a few of that so-called brave sort to Shayol Ghul to be fitted with *cour’souvra*.

She did not shift form even after the women far below had left. Having eight legs caused her no discomfort, and she had long since gotten used to the strange vision that taking the form of her namesake afforded. Holding fast to the pillar, she pondered her next move. The girls’ caution against revealing their location was a useless prudence, when the *Atha’an Shadar* in Ebou Dar had already

told her where they were going. The only question was: what would she do about the other Chosen's faltering plot with Sammael, after she had killed Nynaeve al'Meara?

* * *

Dani's quarters in the Sun Palace were luxurious due to the lie that she was Aes Sedai. It seemed a lifetime ago that she'd spoken that lie, but it still followed her. She had a feeling that, sooner or later, it was a lie that was going to come back to haunt her. But that was a distant concern. She lingered in the room only long enough to step into her slippers, and wrap a loose robe of dark silk over her nightdress before slipping out into the quiet hallway. She had news to deliver.

She went to Moiraine first, since she was closest. The only real Aes Sedai among their group, she tolerated the lie of the Accepted in public but spoke her scorn freely in private. Or had. As a method of keeping them in line, it had proven only partially successful even before Moiraine began flouting a rule of the Tower that was almost as closely enforced as the one against pretending to be Aes Sedai.

Dani could tell from the light leaking out from under Moiraine's door that she was still awake, but no sound escaped her room. She hesitated before knocking, unsure if the ward Moiraine had used worked both ways or not. Just as she was about to knock again, the door opened, and Lan loomed out at her, grim faced and cold eyed.

"Rulonir," was all the Warder said. He did not move to let her in until Moiraine's voice chimed out assent. As soon as she'd stepped past him, Lan leaned out to look both ways down the hall, and then pulled the door closed again. He leant beside it, to watch and listen in silence, as was his habit. Dani couldn't help but notice that he rested his back against stone rather than wood. Harder to pierce, stone. Nowhere was safe.

"What did you learn in *Tel'aran'rhiod*?" Moiraine asked. She was fully dressed, in a blue gown that was fit for this, the palace of her birth. A tiny woman with pale skin, her black hair had been teased into waves, and her lightly hooded eyes gave away none of her thoughts. She looked a queen, though she had refused to become one.

"The last I'm going to for a while. The Wise Ones insist we call off the meetings, due to the Forsaken attacks."

"Plural?"

Dani nodded. "Moghedien went after Nynaeve. She didn't give me any details, but she looked ... nervous." Which was something Nynaeve rarely did, even when she should be.

"Was she harmed?" Lan demanded.

"She looked fine to me," Dani said carefully. He rarely looked, well, anything, but there was definitely concern on his face now. He had a white-knuckled grip on his sword, too.

"Nynaeve is far outside our influence now. We must entrust her welfare to her, and to those who travel with her," Moiraine said. Her face revealed nothing of what she thought of Lan's behaviour. "It is another that must concern us."

Dani nodded. "There's something else. Nynaeve has seen Forsaken in *Tel'aran'rhiod*. She mentioned five of them. Including Lanfear. She thinks they are plotting something, perhaps together."

"Lanfear," Moiraine said after a moment.

They both knew that Lanfear had visited Rand in Tear, and maybe other times that he had not told them of. No-one had much knowledge of the Forsaken except the Forsaken themselves—only fragments of fragments remained in the Tower—but it was known that Lanfear had loved Lews Therin Telamon. They two, and Rand, knew that she still did.

"With luck," the Aes Sedai went on, "we will not have to worry about Lanfear. The others Nynaeve saw are another matter. You and I must keep as close a watch as we can. I wish more of the Wise Ones could channel." She gave a small laugh. "But I might as well wish they were all Tower trained while I am about it, or to live forever. They may be strong in many ways, but they are sadly lacking in others."

"A watch is all very well, but what else? If five Forsaken come at him together, he will need every bit of help we can give him."

"Then we must divide them," Moiraine said. It was a good answer, yet it told her nothing at the same time. How were they to divide them? If the Aes Sedai knew, she would not say. And if she did not, she would never admit it.

"I have to pass on Nynaeve's warnings to Rand," she said.

"You know where to find him," Moiraine said coolly.

Dani fell silent. They were both very familiar with the way to Rand's tower. And with Rand's "tower", for that matter. Somehow it was a lot harder to be casual about that with Moiraine than it was with the Aiel, or even some other wetlanders. Lan's face had returned to stone, but she avoided his eye as she let herself out.

The halls became progressively less empty the closer she got to Rand's quarters, with most of the occupants being cold-eyed *Far Dareis Mai* with spear or bow in hand, carefully studying anyone who dared come too close to their *Car'a'carn*. Or almost anyone. Dani they let pass without comment at the least, or spoke a friendly greeting to.

One of those who greeted her was Riallin, on duty outside the door to Rand's private rooms. "Are you going in?" she asked.

"I have news," Dani said as she approached. She was pleasantly surprised by how cool her cheeks stayed.

"The *Car'a'carn* gets a lot of news it seems," said Freya, a towering, pale-haired Miagoma.

Riallin smiled prettily. "Even more so before Couladin woke from the dream. The news was never ending."

Some of the other Maidens, the ones who had been with Rand since Rhuidean, chuckled over that, while the newer ones, whose clans had remained neutral in the war with the Shaido, remained quizzical. Dani herself was less than pleasantly surprised at how hot her cheeks became.

Riallin gestured to the double doors ahead. "Well, go and give him the news."

"Lucky boy," Freya murmured as Dani set her hand to the latch.

"Lucky girl," Riallin added, as Dani slipped past and quickly set her back to the closed doors. Bloody Maidens!

Gathering herself, she passed through the anteroom with its lines of chairs, and went straight to Rand's bedroom, which was dimly lit by a single lamp.

She wasn't surprised to find them in bed. Raine was bouncing in Rand's lap. Her red hair was so short that Dani could see every detail of her back and bottom, all the way down to where he was joined with her.

The combination of Raine's narrow hips and Rand's thick cock was almost obscene, but it was an obscenity that heated Dani's body disturbingly quickly. She was already disrobing when they noticed her, and was naked by the time she reached the bed. *The news can wait a little longer*, she thought, as Rand's lips and Raine's hands found her. Where was the harm in finding a little light in the darkness?

* * *

Pedron Niall, leader of the Children of the Light, had never been a man for lounging in chairs, but the temptation to do so had grown harder to resist as the years came to rest more heavily upon him. Yet he remained straight-backed as he listened to the reports in his office. The fall of one Amyrlin and the rise of another mattered little to him in itself—one witch was as evil as another—but the rumours of a split in the White Tower invigorated him. A distracted enemy was a vulnerable enemy. Dain Bornhald did not share Pedron's excitement. Though young, there were bags under his eyes and lines on his face, graven there by grief and loss. Though a lieutenant, he let Hundredman Byar speak for him. That gaunt man listed the crimes he had witnessed with a cold grimness, even as a fire burned in his sunken eyes.

"Geofram Bornhald and five hundred of the Children dead at the hands of a false Dragon controlled by the Aes Sedai. You have no doubts, Child Byar?"

"None, my Lord Captain Commander. I saw three of the Tar Valon witches in Emond's Field. We would have killed them but Lord Captain Bornhald ordered us to wait until the Trollocs had been dealt with."

"We caught two on our way here from Tar Valon," Bornhald's son said with a dark scowl. "They paid for it."

"They cost us more than fifty dead before we stuck them full of arrows," Byar added. Pedron heard no rebuke in his voice.

"You are sure—sure they were Aes Sedai?"

"The ground erupted under our feet." Byar's voice was firm and full of belief. He had little imagination, did Jaret Byar; death was part of a soldier's life, however it came. "Lightnings struck our ranks out of a clear sky. My Lord Captain Commander, what else could they have been?"

Pedron frowned. "Many tales of the Seanchan have reached my ears of late."

"The Seanchan are a tale concocted by the White Tower to hide their foul lies!" Dain claimed.

Pedron was not so sure. He put no sin beyond Tar Valon, but too many of those tales had come from agents that had proved reliable in the past. If they existed, the invaders were an added complication to an already over-complicated problem. The Children of the Light had too many enemies, great and small. Empires might be beyond his toppling, but traitors were not.

"And Ordeith? You say Bornhald signed a warrant for his arrest. Do you know where he fled?"

Byar did not stand straighter, if only because it would have been impossible. "I do not, my Lord Captain Commander. I thought it more important to deliver my report than to hunt for him."

Schooling his reactions had not been difficult for Pedron for many years, but he sighed internally. That even the simplest of the tasks before him should prove so hard ...

"I do not care where he is," Dain snapped. "I did not come here to talk of Ordeith!"

Pedron was a thin man, his face as wrinkled as old parchment, but the look he gave the young officer was knife sharp. Grief was no excuse. Byar did not shift his feet, but the fire in his eyes did not lessen as he turned his stare on Bornhald's son.

Said son lowered his head, face flushing. "I apologise, Lord Captain Commander. I spoke from grief. I burn to see my father avenged, and to wrap my hands around al'Thor's throat."

"I will forgive it, this once, Child Bornhald."

Rand al'Thor. He moved fast, this false Dragon. Too fast. That he had Aes Sedai assistance would have been plain even without Byar's testimony. Pedron's plan to use him to make inroads in Valreis had been misguided. Al'Thor had caused his chaos there, passed through, gone to the Theren to murder the Children Pedron had sent, and then seemingly gone on to Tear. There, if the tales could be believed, he captured the Stone itself. It was more likely that the Aes Sedai had taken it through treachery, and handed it over to their pet, but that he ruled the nation for them now seemed indisputable. And now? Light! The news out of Tear was old and stale already. If al'Thor had managed all of that while Pedron still thought him mired in Valreis, what could he have done in the time it took reports from Tear to reach Amador? Too fast. Too dangerous. Perhaps more dangerous than Logain Ablar and Mazrim Taim combined. It had been a mistake to try and use him. Al'Thor had to die; young Dain was right about that much.

"My Lord Captain Commander," Byar said suddenly, "Lord Captain Bornhald did command me to stand aside from the battle. I was to watch, and tell his son, Lord Dain, how he died. Then report to you."

"Yes, yes," Niall said impatiently. For a moment he studied Byar's hollow-cheeked face, then added, "No-one doubts your honesty or courage. It is exactly the sort of thing Geofram Bornhald would do, facing a battle in which he feared his entire command might die." *And not the sort of thing you have imagination enough to think up.*

"It is. He was a great man, and deserved better than to die at the hands of some arrogant bumpkin," Dain choked. His eyes shone with unshed tears and unfed vengeance both. The son was not the father. Pedron would need a better weapon to deal with al'Thor.

"You have given me much to think on," Pedron said. "Leave me now. I have plans to make."

The two men bowed before departing, as was proper. Yet as they straightened and turned to go, Byar hesitated. "My Lord Captain Commander, we were betrayed." Hatred gave his voice a saw-toothed edge.

"By this one Darkfriend you spoke of, Child Byar?" He could not keep an edge out of his own voice. A year's planning lay in ruins amid the corpses of five hundred of the Children, and Byar wanted to talk only of this one man. "This young blacksmith you've only seen twice, this Perrin from the Theren?"

“When he appears, Children die.”

Pedron cut him short with a wave of his hand. “The man’s death warrant was already signed by Lord Captain Bornhald. He will be killed on sight. For now, I have more important matters to concern myself with. Leave me.”

They left, and the armoured guards stationed outside Pedron’s door pulled it closed again behind them. Alone, he allowed himself to slump in his chair. His old bones felt the weight of their years, but the fight could not be abandoned. Somehow, he had to find a way to kill Rand al’Thor. After all, what chance would they have of winning Tarmon Gai’don with a monster like him running wild in their midst?

* * *

“Maerone controls the only intact bridge over the Alguenya,” Talmanes said, peering through his eyeglass at the walled city ahead. “You were right to consider retaking it a priority.”

Mat grunted sourly. Retaking it! All he’d wanted was to use the bloody bridge. It was the fastest way over the river and away from the madness spreading through Cairhien. Bloody Talmanes and those bloody idiots that called themselves the Band of the Red Hand! How had they caught up to him? Images flashed through his head, memories of another group of heroes and fools—as if those weren’t the same thing!—who had used that name. Long dead, those ones; ancient memories from a nearly forgotten time. The memories weren’t really his, but they’d made themselves so comfortably at home in his head that it was hard to separate them from his real memories these days. If he didn’t get away from Talmanes and Rand and the rest of these lunatics, he’d end up as dead as those ancients.

“It was a dark day when I heard the Andorans had taken Maerone,” Talmanes went on. “It was the last thing we needed, them showing up in the middle of a civil war. But I except they’ll swallow their ambitions after this.”

Mat grunted even more sourly. A single reluctant look back showed the familiar aftermath of battle. Dead men, dying men, dancing men. Another victory for the Band of the Red Hand. The commoners were attending to the burials, the nobles were posing like peacocks, and both were singing Mat’s praises. *Burn me, I wasn’t looking for a fight. I just wanted to use the bloody bridge!* The Andorans hadn’t been interested in talking, though. They’d called themselves the White Lions in their war cries. That was a new one. Usually it was the Queen’s Guards who led the charge in an Andoran army, but Mat had seen no-one in their scarlet uniform. Why the change?

Talmanes snapped his eyeglass shut. “Taking the city will not be difficult. There are not enough foreigners left inside, and the populace will likely rise against them as soon as we hit the gates. Assuming you mean to take the city, of course.”

Mat’s glower didn’t lower the slender Cairhien lord’s brow in the slightest. Take the city! Why would he risk his neck doing anything that stupid? Still. Maybe he could sneak away in the night, while the Band were busy getting drunk. He could lose them in the Kingswood, and be half way to Arad Doman before they knew it.

“They can count as well as we can,” he said. “No need to attack. Estean! Get on over there and do the noble thing. Get all snooty with them and make them surrender.”

The potato-faced Tairen blinked at him for a moment, then at the crossbowmen up on the walls of Maerone. He mopped at this face with an embroidered handkerchief before calling for his armsmen, and riding off towards the city. If Estean bloody Andiamma was going to get turned into a pincushion, then he was not going to be the only one.

The man was luckier in life than at cards, though, and no pincushions were made. The gates opened without further bloodshed, and Mat soon found himself riding through. A good third of the Band was already inside by then, of course. He wanted away from them, but he wanted not to be skewered by a bunch of angry Andorans even more. They had started the fight, so it hadn’t been his fault, but there were better odds of an Aes Sedai marrying a Whitecloak than their seeing it the same way.

The danger was not as great as he’d feared. The White Lion banner of Andor flew over Maerone on a tall staff, and fifty of the Queen’s Guards held it, in red coats with long white collars beneath shining breastplates. They had been placed there, their captain said, to make a safe haven for refugees who wished to flee to Andor, but fewer such came every day. It was a good thing they had

come when they did, as he expected to receive orders returning his company to Andor any day. This he said with a blank face while surrounded by soldiers of the Band.

Mat let the man have his retreat. Never leave the enemy no way out; it just made things bloodier than they had to be. “Why so sure about those orders?” he asked, idly curious to know what excuse he’d come up with. He kept a ready list of those, for use in case of emergencies.

The captain sighed. “With Queen Morgase dead, all her plans will be cancelled. At least until a new queen takes the throne.”

Mat gaped. “Dead? You’re sure, man? When!? How!?”

“I thought you might be an Andorman. Strange to see one riding with Cairhienin and Tairens ...”

“I’m not a bloody Andorman, and you aren’t answering my questions!” Mat shouted.

“I don’t know when or how. The news only just reached us,” the man said stiffly.

Mat scowled. Blood and ashes. Andor was right on his path out of here. If Morgase was gone ... then there was more to cry over than the loss of a bloody good-looking woman. “Who rules in Caemlyn now?” he asked casually, suspecting he knew.

The captain finally cracked an expression: outrage. “Lord Gaebril controls the city. And calls himself King Gaebril now. King! As if any good Andoran would ever let a man rule,” the man said.

Mat snorted softly, but didn’t press it. Gaebril. If Morgase was gone it was good odds that he’d been the one to send her on her way. He’d tried to kill her daughter, after all. Why not the mother, too? *Burn me! Why can’t things just be simple?* The whole world was going mad.

“Well, best get ahead of those orders,” Mat said. “This lot aren’t like to welcome you in a Cairhienin city, now that the war’s over.”

The man grunted, but Mat didn’t press that either. The war had better be over. Except ... What would Rand do when he heard? The man had been busy canoodling with Elayne back in Tear. Neither of them were likely to shrug it off.

A dance, a kiss, a bit of gambling. And freedom from all of this madness. Was that so much to ask?

The Andoran went off—to get ready to leave if he was smart—and Mat wandered off alone, brooding over his lack of options. *Not my job.*

His bleak mood held when he passed The Silver Horn and its innocent-faced singer. Maybe that was why he went running toward the shouting that erupted down the street in front of another inn. The Redarms would take care of it if it involved soldiers, but Mat shoved his way through the crowd anyway. Sammael ruling in Illian, and the rest of the Forsaken the Light knew where, all probably looking for a chance to take Mat Cauthon’s head in passing. That did not even count what the Aes Sedai would do to him if they laid hands on him again: the ones who knew too much, anyway. And everybody thinking he was going to go out and be a bloody hero! He usually tried to talk his way out of a fight if he could not walk wide of it, but right then he wanted an excuse to punch somebody in the nose. What he found was not anything he expected.

A crowd of townspeople, short, drably clothed Cairhienin made an expressionless ring around two tall lean men with curled moustaches, long Altaran coats in bright silk, and swords with ornate, gilded pommels and quillons. The fellow in a red coat stood grinning in amusement while he watched the one in yellow shake a boy little taller than Mat’s waist by the collar like a dog shaking a rat.

Mat held on to his temper; he reminded himself that he did not know what had started all this. “Easy with the boy,” he said, laying a hand on yellow-coat’s arm. “What did he do to deserve—?”

“He touched me horse!” the man snapped in a Mindean accent, shaking off Mat’s hand. Mindeans boasted—boasted!—that they had the worst tempers of anyone in Altara. “I’ll break his skinny peasant neck for him! I’ll wring his scrawny—!”

Without another word Mat brought the butt of his spear up hard, straight between the fellow’s legs. The Mindean’s mouth opened, but no sound came out. His eyes rolled up till almost nothing showed but white. The boy darted off as the man’s legs folded, depositing him on knees and face in the street. “No, you won’t,” Mat said.

That was not the end of it, of course; the man in the red coat snatched at his sword. He managed to bare an inch of blade before Mat cracked his wrist with the spear-butt. Grunting, he let go the sword hilt, but grabbed for the long-bladed dagger on his belt with his other hand. Hastily Mat

clipped him over the ear; not hard, but the fellow went down atop the other man. *Bloody fool!* Mat was not sure whether he was describing red-coat or himself.

Half a dozen Redarms had finally pushed through the onlookers, Tairen cavalymen awkward afoot in knee boots, their swollen black-and-gold sleeves crushed under the armbands. Edorion had the boy in hand, a gaunt sullen-looking lad of six or so, wriggling bare toes in the dust and now and again giving an experimental tug at Edorion's grip. He was perhaps the ugliest child Mat had ever seen, with a squashed nose, a mouth too wide for his face and ears too big that stuck out besides. By the holes in his coat and breeches, he was one of the refugees. He looked more dirt than anything else.

"Settle this out, Harnan," Mat said. That was a lantern-jawed Redarm, a file leader with a long suffering expression and a crude tattoo of a hawk on his left cheek. The fashion seemed to be spreading through the Band, but most limited themselves to parts of the body normally covered. "Find out what caused all this, then run these two louts out of town." They deserved that much, whatever the provocation.

A skinny man in an Altaran coat of dark wool wiggled through the onlookers and dropped to his knees beside the pair on the ground. Yellow-coat had begun emitting strangled groans, and red-coat was beginning to clutch his head in his hands and mumble what sounded like imprecations. The newcomer made more noise than both together. "Oh, me lords! Me Lord Paers! Me Lord Culen! Are you killed?" He stretched trembling hands toward Mat. "Oh, don't kill them, me lord! Not helpless like this. They're Hunters for the Horn, me lord. I'm their man, Padry. Heroes, they are, me lord."

"I'm not going to kill anybody," Mat cut in, disgusted. "But you get these heroes on their horses and out of Maerone by sunset. I don't like grown men who threaten to break a child's neck. Sunset!"

"But, me lord, they're injured. He's only a peasant boy, and he was molesting Lord Paers' horse."

"I was only sitting on it," the boy burst out. "I was not—what you said."

Mat nodded grimly. "Boys don't get their necks broken for sitting on a horse, Padry. Not even peasant boys. You get these two gone, or I'll see about breaking *their* necks." He motioned to Harnan, who nodded sharply to the other Redarms—file leaders never did anything themselves, any more than bannermen did—who snatched Paers and Culen up roughly and hustled them away groaning with Padry trailing behind, wringing his hands and protesting that his masters were in no condition to ride, that they were Hunters for the Horn and heroes.

Edorion still held the source of all this bother by an arm, Mat realized. The Redarms were gone and the townsfolk drifting away. No-one glanced twice at the boy; they had their own children to look after, and a hard enough time doing that. Mat exhaled heavily. "Don't you realize you could be hurt 'just sitting' on a strange horse, boy? A man like that probably rides a stallion that could trample a little boy into the bottom of his stall so no-one could ever tell you were there."

"A gelding." The boy gave another jerk at Edorion's grip, and finding it had not loosened, put on a sulky face. "It was a gelding, and it would not have hurt me. Horses like me. I am not a little boy: I am nine. And my name is Olver, not boy."

"Olver, is it?" Nine? He might be. Mat had trouble telling, especially with Cairhienin children. "Well, Olver, where are your mother and father?" He looked around, but the refugees he saw passed by as quickly as the townsfolk. "Where are they, Olver? I have to get you back to them."

Instead of answering, Olver bit his lip. A tear trickled from one eye, and he scrubbed it away angrily. "The Aiel killed my papa. One of those ... Shado. Mama said we were going to Andor. She said we were going to live on a farm. With horses."

"Where is she now?" Mat asked softly.

"She got sick. I—I buried her where there were some flowers." Suddenly Olver kicked Edorion and began thrashing in his grip. Tears rolled down his face. "You let me go. I can take care of myself. You let me go."

"Take care of him until we can find somebody," Mat told Edorion, who gaped at him in the middle of trying to fend the boy off and hold on to him at the same time.

"Me? What am I to do with this leopard of a carpet mouse?"

"Get him a meal, for one thing." Mat's nose wrinkled; by the smell, Olver had spent at least a little time on the floor of that gelding's stall. "And a bath. He stinks."

“You talk to me,” Olver shouted, rubbing at his face. The tears helped him rearrange the dirt. “You talk to me, not over my head!”

Mat blinked, then bent down. “I’m sorry, Olver. I always hated people doing that to me, too. Now, this is how it is. You smell bad, so Edorion here is going to take you to the nearest inn where the innkeeper’s going to let you have a bath.” The sulkiness on Olver’s face grew. “If she says anything, you tell her I said you could have one. She can’t stop you.” Mat held in a grin at the boy’s sudden stare; that would have spoiled it. Olver might not like the idea of a bath, but if someone might try to stop him from having one ... “Now, you do what Edorion says. He’s a real Tairen lord, and he’s going to find you a good hot meal, and some clothes without holes in them. And some shoes.” Best not to add “somebody to look after you”. The innkeeper could take care of that; a little gold would overcome any reluctance.

“I do not like Tairens,” Olver mumbled, frowning first at Edorion then Mat. Edorion had his eyes shut and was muttering to himself. “He is a real lord? Are you a lord, too?”

“You mind your language,” Mat said.

The Band weren’t exactly being greeted as saviours, but the people of Maerone didn’t look likely to kick up a fuss over their moving in either. Mat wanted a drink. He wanted a bridge, too, and he was going to get one. He was. He followed Edorion to the nearest inn, and pretended not to hear the man’s claims that Mat would be better at taking care of Olver.

He bought a drink and took it to a corner table, where his sour mood managed to drive away any company. The innkeeper gave Edorion a hard time, and no amount of flashing of sigils was enough to make her relent. Money did, of course. Good old gold solved most of the world’s problems. While they were off trying to make Olver less stinky, Mat silently listed all the reasons that going back to tell Rand what he knew about Morgase would be a terrible idea.

CHAPTER 1: *The Lady in the Tower*



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 roared down from the Spine of the World. 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.

Across a ravaged land the wind roved, past burned towns, newly dug graves, and yellowed bones marked by the weapons of men and the teeth of scavengers. Onwards the wind gusted, until it came to a city of dark stone, all of rigid straight lines. A square palace with tall towers at each corner stood precisely in the middle of the city. Inscrutable it was, like the people who lived there. Impenetrable, too, for it was against those palace walls that the wind broke.

Deep within the Sun Palace of Cairhien, Rand led a carefully selected group of women down a richly furnished hallway to the room he'd arranged. It had been nothing more than a storage room before Rand claimed it. Empty now, the windowless room at the heart of the palace would serve him well in the days to come. He'd ordered people to stay away for now, claiming that he wanted to interrogate a prisoner. It probably hadn't done his reputation any favours, but it was not as if anyone was ever going to think him benign anyway. And the fewer who knew he could Travel the better. Take your enemies by surprise wherever possible. That was his policy.

Lady Morsa of the Seanchan was not a tall woman, and looked almost childlike while being hauled between Adelin and Caitlin. The two Maidens were well over six feet tall. Aviendha—a former Maiden herself—came close to the six foot mark as well. She alone knew how Morsa had come to be Rand's prisoner, and she did not like being reminded of what had happened that day.

"I will tell you nothing," Morsa said, chin raised proudly. It wasn't enough to allow her to look down her nose at anyone, not from all the way down there, but she made a good effort at it.

Without answering, Rand checked the hall. They'd followed his orders and stayed away, so her display, useful as it would have been, amounted to nothing. He opened the door, and gestured Adelin inside. "We'll see."

Half a dozen Maidens took station outside the room, but the rest came with him and Aviendha. So did the last non-Aiel present. Not all of the Aiel welcomed Merile's presence, but none did more than stare at her coldly. Not today at least. She was nearly as short as Morsa, if a good bit less busty. Her black hair was the opposite of Morsa's, too. The Seanchan woman hadn't been able to shave the sides of her head lately and some fine stubble had come in, while the silvery crest that ran back over her skull was looking a little deflated now. Height would have to be enough. He could compensate for the rest.

"Hug the walls," Rand said. He seized *saidin*, letting the One Power flow through him, shivering in the shocking heat of it. All his senses flared brighter, even as the rancid taint the Dark One had placed upon the male half of the Power seeped into him, turning his stomach and scraping at the walls of his mind. Madness waited for any man who touched the power now. It waited for him, if it had not already come.

My mistake. My sacrifice. And for what? Lews Therin whispered.

I know. Be quiet, Rand told him.

Trying his best to ignore the unwelcome presence of the other man within his skull, he wove the threads of the Power together just so. A bright silver line appeared in the centre of the room, and then expanded until it became a rectangular hole in the air, a gateway to another place. He was relieved to see that no-one was in his old room in Rhuidean. Had any poor fool happened to be standing where the gateway opened, it would have sliced him in half. He would have to arrange for a space to be set aside there, as he had in Cairhien.

Far Dareis Mai did not wait for his order. As soon as the gateway opened, a dozen Maidens went through, one after the other. Rand didn't like the idea of them taking risks to protect him. They

were women. Those risks should be his to take, not theirs. But at least it was only Rhuidean they were going to. It was unlikely that any dangers awaited him there. It was the gateway itself that held Aviendha's attention, and tightened her lips. The glower did nothing to hide her beauty. It never had.

"Still haven't recalled how you did it, then?" he whispered.

She stared blue-green daggers at him. "Are you trying to shame me?" she said, just as quietly.

Rand suppressed a sigh. "Of course not. I whispered, didn't I?"

Once the Maidens were through, he stepped over the Dragonwall to the heart of the Aiel Waste, with Aviendha and Merile following close behind. Adelin and Caitlin brought up the rear, though they had to turn sideways to avoid accidentally touching the edges of the gateway. He'd warned them, quietly, about that on the way down to his Travelling room.

The weave could not be tied off and took a lot of strength to maintain, so he released it as soon as they were all through. The gateway winked shut at once. "You can let her go now. She can't escape anymore."

Morsa was too composed to rub her arms where the Maidens had held her. "Why are you so sure I cannot escape?" she asked in her drawling accent.

He nodded to the glassless window. "Take a look."

A few of the Maidens kept their eyes on her, but most were busy breathing deep of the arid air of their Three-fold Land. The heat was not so terrible, in a shaded room up high in Rhuidean as they were, and they looked happy to be home. Rand could only shake his head. For his part, it had been a relief to get back to the "wetlands", even though Cairhien was no home of his. He doubted Morsa would enjoy the Three-fold Land any more than he had.

He followed her to the window, where they gazed out on the half-finished city of Rhuidean, whose towering buildings followed one after the other until ending abruptly in a sun-wracked wasteland. Morsa stared out in silence. The fingers she wiped across her brow had long nails, two of which were lacquered as a sign of her rank. She had to know something that could help.

"You may not have heard of it, but we call this place the Aiel Waste," he said. "Artur Hawking sent armies into it twice, to try and conquer it. They failed. Some of the few defeats he suffered in his career. It freezes you at night, and burns you during the day. Water is hard to find, unless you are an Aiel and have been raised here. Most of the plants and animals are deadly. From this city—Rhuidean—it is a several week walk through all that before you could reach territory held by someone other than my Aiel, and it is the long-standing policy of those Aiel to kill on sight anyone who trespasses in their land. You wouldn't survive to reach the borders. I will assign people to watch over you, but I suggest you think of them as your friends instead of your gaolers. Leaving this city would be suicide."

"You mean to leave me here." Her face remained a pretty mask, but her voice trembled.

Rand shrugged. "I want to learn about the Seanchan, but it's not a priority right now. I'll come back and visit whenever I have time. To ask you again to tell me about your people. Perhaps you'll have come to your senses next month. Or next year. I don't know. You'll be safe here in the meantime."

"Next year," she whispered.

"Or sooner. We'll see. I can't predict how long it will be between visits, so think carefully before you refuse me again." He left Morsa where she was, and went to Aviendha. "Did you bring them?"

"I said I would, Rand al'Thor." He was tempted to apologise. Watching his every word around the Aiel was exhausting sometimes. Aviendha took the bundle from her shoulder to show him what was inside.

He nodded. "Alright. Strip her."

Morsa's gasp made him turn. She was pressing her hands to her eye-catching bosom. "You beast! May you be *sei'mosiev* forever!" She tried to flee the Maidens that converged on her, but didn't get very far. They pulled at her odd pleated dress rather than cutting it off; they knew what he needed it for. Morsa did not, and her panicked condemnations continued long after Rand had turned his back and a disgusted Aviendha stalked towards her. "Unhand me, dogs! Your master may ravage me, but I will never betray the Empress!"

"What!?" Rand choked. He only just stopped himself from turning around again. "I'm not going to ... to that!"

"You aren't?"

"Of course not! Why would I do that?"

"Excuse me?" She sounded offended. He heard some of the Maidens laughing.

Merile was swishing her skirts, seemingly fascinated by her slippers as they peeked out.

"Probably should have explained to her first," she said.

Rand grunted. "You might have a point."

Caitlin found that amusing. "If the *Car'a'carn* needs advice from this Lost One, I fear for the future of the Aiel."

"I get advice from a lot of people," he said. "Do you have a problem with Lost Ones?" Some of the Aiel did. It worried him, if only for Merile's sake.

Caitlin was a notably beautiful woman, but the most eye-catching thing about her was her size. Fully six and a half feet tall, she matched Rand for height but had the muscles and the curves to put it all in proportion. She towered over Merile so completely that he felt he should step between them when she turned her green-eyed frown on the little Tinker.

"Many Daryne have succumbed to the bleakness. Some sought out the Lost Ones, thinking their ways those of the Jenn Aiel," the Maiden said flatly.

"Um ... they were, weren't they?" Merile said.

Caitlin glared. "Are you saying they should have given up their spears? Should I?"

Merile didn't step back. "No. Then the Trollocs would get you," Merile said mildly. "Do you think I should get a spear, too?"

That confused Caitlin. She looked Merile up and down. "I do not think you would be very good at using one."

Merile shrugged easily. "I think so, too. I don't want to fight, but I don't want the Shadow to win either. It's hard to know what the right thing to do is. Maybe if I just fought Trollocs it wouldn't be so bad."

"You would break the code of your people?"

"They said I wasn't one of the People anymore," Merile sighed. "There's no Way now. No code. Just little old me, trying to figure out what's right. Do you think I should fight?"

"Yes."

"Well, there you go then. No need to worry about what's past." She smiled at the nonplussed Maiden before coming to stand at Rand's side. He found himself smiling wryly. So much for needing to protect her.

"If you try to hit me again, you will scream for it," he heard Aviendha say. "We are done, Rand al'Thor."

When he turned, he found Morsa dressed in the dark skirt and loose blouse of an Aielwoman. The Seanchan lady was sulking at her indifferent attackers. Her pleated dress was draped over Aviendha's arm.

"Alright. You two keep an eye on her," he told Ana and Marya, a pair of pretty, yellow-haired Daryne. "I'll send someone else to relieve you before I leave."

"You will wait for us before opening the hole," said Ana, the shorter of the two. It was only half a question.

"I'll wait. For a while." He gave Morsa a hard stare. "Your stay can be as long or as short as you choose. All you have to do is answer my questions. Think on it."

He left her there, just as he'd threatened, and strode out of the room and through the familiar, oversized halls of the building. The others hurried to keep up, as he descended the curving staircases. He saw no-one on his way to the main doors. It didn't look like anyone had moved in since he left, which surprised him. The structures raised by the Jenn Aiel were oversized but there were not so many of them that one could be left abandoned for long, not if the Aiel kept moving into the city at the rate they'd been moving in before he marched for Cairhien.

The now familiar heat of the Waste pushed down against him when he stepped out of the shade and into the street. Here it was busier, and several of those who saw him had recognition in their eyes. He hadn't planned ahead for this, but he was sure he could find someone to organise things for him. If nothing else, the *ta'veren* effect could perhaps work in his favour. So he waited, while Aviendha and Merile teamed up to try and convince him he was crazy.

They did not fall silent when Seris strolled around the corner and paused to stare at him. It was only when they saw the way he smiled that they trailed off.

"Why are you smirking? Is it because she's pretty?" Merile asked. Aviendha narrowed her eyes suspiciously.

It was hard to be outraged by that when the suspicions were partially warranted. Seris was indeed pretty, despite the thin scars on her face. He'd met the red-haired girl before, and gotten to know her rather well. Strange that she was the one who just so happened to pass by where he was standing, though. There were still *algai'd'siswai* here, primarily *Cor Darei* charged with protecting the city, much as they'd been charged with protecting the other holds while the bulk of the Aiel army was with Rand. He would have expected some of them.

"I see you, Seris," he called, while Merile waved hello and Aviendha frowned.

"I see you, *Car'a'carn*," she answered slowly as she approached. "How is it that you are here?"

"I suspect you will find out soon enough."

The two Aiel's faces went blank, but not so Merile. "Ooo. Mysterious."

"Do not encourage him," Aviendha told her.

Rand ignored them. "Has anything interesting happened while I was gone?" he asked Seris.

"The Ogier you sent for have started to arrive. Are you here to meet them?" When he shook his head, she cocked hers. "Rand. Why are you here?"

"Rand!?" Aviendha said sharply.

Seris was shorter and younger but unmoved by her anger. "It is customary for wetlanders to use the first half of their names, is it not?"

"Yes, but ... that is a wetlander foolishness. We do not call him so. I do not."

Seris shrugged. "I do."

"I didn't come here for the Ogier. I came here for you, it seems." The women stared. "Because I need someone to organise some things for me. I mean. There's a prisoner in the building behind me. A Seanchan lady. I need people to watch her. Make sure she doesn't escape or cause any trouble, but don't hurt her. Do you think you could arrange that?"

"I can speak to some people, but they may not listen to me," she said, frowning.

"Tell them it comes from me."

"They will wonder how it came to them through me, but I will try."

"There's something else. A room in this building that I want made off limits. For ..." He looked about suspiciously. Depending on how closely he was being watched, it might be foolish to hope that he could keep it secret, but he should still try. He turned for the door and jerked his chin for Seris and the others to follow. Only when they were back inside did he continue. "For Travelling. Basically all that I need is word passed around that the room is off limits to anyone but me."

"A room for travelling?" Seris asked. "Such things are not usually done in rooms."

"With the One Power. But that part I don't want passed around. It could be useful if my enemies don't know I can do it."

She smiled. "Then I am honoured that you entrust me with this knowledge."

"You do not seem surprised, though, Tomanelle," said Aviendha.

Seris met her eyes directly. "I am not surprised to be thought trustworthy, Taardad."

Aviendha's face was a tanned mask. "We will see if you are deserving of it, I think." She studied Rand no more warmly than she did Seris as they climbed the stairs. Merile's vouching for Seris' niceness didn't sway Aviendha at all, yet the cool stares that Seris was getting from her and the Maidens weren't making her drop back from walking at Rand's side.

The scarred girl looked at him as dubiously as their destination, when he showed her the windowless closet he'd picked out for his Travelling room. She was probably wondering if the taint had driven him mad already.

"You will leave, through here?"

Rand nodded. "From here to Cairhien in a single step."

Seris sniffed. "You boast like a Shaido."

"It is not boasting if it is true," Caitlin allowed judiciously.

"I did not say it was underserved," Seris said with a smile.

"Should you not be organising a relief for my ... for the Maidens?" Aviendha asked sharply.

The Maidens themselves were suddenly interested in the walls of the empty room, but Seris just nodded. "I will go and do that." She hesitated for a moment, looking from Aviendha to Rand. "Will you still be here when I am done?"

It was him she was asking. The answer should have been no. A quick visit to drop off Morsa, that was all he'd planned. He hadn't expected to see Seris again. But he was glad to, and would be gladder still to get to see more of her, again. "I want to make sure the arrangements are made before I depart," he said, after too long a pause.

Her smile made him blush. "I will be back soon."

Seris left in a hurry, just short of running. He watched until she reached the stairs and descended, taking two at a time. Then he wandered into the grand chamber he'd used as his meeting room when he'd been staying here. The cushions and cups and so forth had been cleared away, leaving only an empty room of many windows. Out beyond one such he could see the great plaza in which *Avendesora* grew.

The others came with him, though the Maidens scattered to check for any lurking threats. Only Aviendha and Merile went to the window with him, the latter smiling, the former not.

"You spoke to that girl as though she was a Roofmistress," Aviendha said in a low hiss.

Rand blinked. He'd shown none of the formality that his arrival in Cold Rocks Hold had once merited. Where was this coming from? "I was as casual with her as anyone."

"Casually allowing her to speak for you? Do you think to catch her eye as well?"

He sighed. "I think that someone needs to keep an eye on Morsa. Anything else is ..." What? He couldn't finish, not in front of Aviendha. She seemed to hear it anyway, for she turned and stalked away.

He sighed again as he watched her go. Merile sidled close and poked him in the ribs. Big green eyes blinked innocently when he looked down at her. "You should take them both to bed. It's hard to be mad at someone after you've been naked and moaning together," she advised, far from innocently.

"What, what makes you think Aviendha or Seris would want anything to do with m-me? Or each other?" he asked.

Merile rolled her eyes. "I'm not stupid, you know. Aviendha didn't go from pretending I don't exist to asking about my family and health and whether I wanted children and who I have blood feuds with and all that rest for no reason. I'm not sure about her, but I am sure I want to be part of your *harem*. And I don't think you'd have to work very hard to persuade Seris to join either."

Rand didn't know what to say. He doubted she was right about Aviendha or Seris, but there was something more pressing than that. "You'd really marry me? Me? I mean, you know what I am, what I've done. I'm a monster, Merile. You should be getting as far away from me as you can, not pledging to spend your life with me."

"Don't be silly! You're not a monster, and you shouldn't call yourself one," she said with uncommon sternness. Then a more familiar smile blossomed. "And yes, I really would."

Yet, for all that, it was Merile who shooed the Maidens from the room when a slightly breathless Seris returned, claiming to have had no difficulty finding *algai'd'siswai* to take up the watch. Her freckled cheeks coloured when she saw they were alone, but she made no move to withdraw.

"I am surprised Aviendha is not here to guard you," she said.

"The Maidens already checked for any intruders."

A mysterious little smile graced the girl's scarred face. "I am not one, then?"

He cocked his head quizzically. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing, not a thing ... Just got the impression she does not like to let you out of her sight."

He shrugged casually. "Aviendha is hard to predict sometimes."

"All women are," Seris said. "Take me, for example. I did not like letting you out of my sight at all." When he laughed in surprise at her boldness, she grinned. "I worried you would not come back to Rhuidean for a long time. A month of nights, thinking of you, was far too many."

Burn me. Rand bit his lip. "Then why are you still standing over there instead of kissing me?"

Seris came to him, and so bold was she that she threw off her own top before even they touched. He feasted on the sight of her pretty breasts in the moments before she put her arms around his neck and pulled his mouth down to hers.

"I missed you," he confessed, as he combed his fingers through her long red hair.

She fumbled at his unfamiliar garb. "Then take off your clothes and show me something more to remember you by."

He took his reluctant hands from her so he could undress. Seris stood and watched him do so, clothed only from the waist down. She watched him shed his coat and shirt, his boots and breeches. Only when his underwear joined the pile of discarded garments, and the erection she'd inspired was waving freely between them did she shed her own garments.

Rand held himself in check as the dark skirt fell, and even when she shed her visibly damp underwear to show him her sex. When she stepped towards him, he raised a hand. "All of you. I want all of you. To see. You are so beautiful." Biting her lip, Seris bent to remove her soft boots and pull down her dark stockings, while he feasted on the sight of her slender legs and flowing curves. When she was fully naked, she stood up straight, to let him see. "Absolutely beautiful."

He went to her then, to kiss her hard, his hands busy on her soft breast and curvaceous hip. There were no cushions, so he seized her hand and led her to the window, a familiar window from which they could gaze out at the square so far below. The people down there looked tiny. Seris' bottom was not. She thrust it out at him when he leant her against the wall. He savoured the way it looked, and savoured more the way she felt when his lustful cock thrust into her body once more.

They fought back their moans, knowing there were others in the nearby rooms. Their desire proved harder to resist, though. He knew he would not be back to Rhuidean often, and Seris seemed to know and accept it, too. She moved in time with the rocking of his hips, the breasts that he cupped jiggling against his palms, stiff nipples catching on the brands there.

"Do you like them?" she asked.

"I like all of you," he said. He squeezed them harder, to show her, and won a louder moan. After that, each thrust of his hips was matched to a mauling of those soft globes. Seris looked out at the city as they fucked. Though her cheeks were red, no fear over any chance glimpse from a passerby was able to stop her. While they stood, naked and joined, she craned her neck to offer him her lips. He was glad to touch his own to them. As they kissed, he combed his fingers through her hair, both that on her head and that below.

Her breath was coming fast. Assaulted from without and within, it wasn't long before Seris' defences crumbled and she shared her water with him. He felt her shake, and felt her strong legs weaken, too. So he took the back of her thighs in hand and lifted her. Holding her aloft, Rand impaled her helpless pussy again and again. Leaning back, Seris showed no interest in stopping him.

That, as much as the pleasure of her silky heat, and the sight of her naked beauty, brought him close to the brink. He didn't bother trying to resist, he just held her like that, exposed to the world beyond the window. There was surely no-one close enough to see, but it thrilled him to show them all as he filled the girl's fertile womb with his seed. Seris let him, her head lolling back to rest on his shoulder as she moaned her sweet little moans. His strength left him with his lust, both flowing into her. The squelching sounds they'd been making came to an end, and he carefully set her feet back on the floor and pulled himself free before staggering over to lean against the wall. Seris leant, too, but on the other side of the window, her breasts moving with each deep breath.

"I hope this is going to be a regular thing between us," he said.

She smiled. "I would be bloody offended if it was not, after this. Not regular enough for my liking, but that is what happens when you let an *algai'd'siswai* catch your eye. They are always running somewhere, to stab someone else, when they should be at home, stabbing their ... Never mind."

"I'll try," he promised. "There are so many duties to attend to, but I'll try to come back as often as I can."

She pushed away from the wall, smiled out at the city and then at him. "We will be waiting." Then she bit her lip and peered suspiciously at the doorway. Seris hastened to gather up her clothes, and began dressing, showing a good bit less boldness than before now that her desire had been sated. Rand should probably have rushed to dress as well, but watching her do it was far too enjoyable. It was only when her blouse and skirt had hidden her curves from him that he bent to gather his own things.

When they were done, he kissed her cheek, tucked a few loose strands of hair behind her ear, and preceded the smiling Aiel girl from the room. He was glad to note the lack of Maidens at the doorway, but wondered at it, too, especially when they appeared at either end of the corridor once he

and Seris stepped out of the room. How far did their vow against contact with him extend? He'd already been given cause to regret it, especially with so many attractive Maidens from the formerly neutral clans, such as Caitlin, having joined him. He would have even more cause for regret if they decided their vow should extend to non-Maidens as well. What if one of them decided to hurt Seris? The steps of the approaching Maidens faltered, and Rand wiped the scowl from his face.

"I will keep your prisoner here, *Car'a'carn*, as you explained," Seris said formally. "She will not be allowed to harm herself, or escape."

Rand cleared his throat. "Thank you, Seris. Now that we have discussed the matter in detail, I feel confident I can leave it in your hands."

From the flat looks the Maidens were giving him, he doubted they were fooling anyone. "I should go and see to the prisoner," Seris said stiffly.

"Take care. Of her. Until I can return." Their parting was as awkward as his words. Seris hastened off, chased by *Far Dareis Mai* eyes. Those same eyes flogged Rand as he went in search of Aviendha and Merile. It was time they returned to Cairhien.

It was easy to find them. Merile grinned and Aviendha frowned. They might have said more, too, but Rand pre-empted them, claiming urgency and gruffly insisting that they leave at once. He wasn't at all sure that had worked either, but soon all those who had come from Cairhien were gathered outside the new Travelling room, save for Morsa herself. Once inside, he seized *saidin* and fought through the taint and the Power long enough to spin a gateway.

Nerise directed the Maidens, heading through into Cairhien along with them while Adelin and Caitlin remained behind to watch Rand. He was impatient to be on his way, so stepped through into Cairhien without waiting for Nerise's call. She scowled at him and shook her head, but said nothing. Once Aviendha and Merile were through, he released the Source and let the gateway snap shut. They were almost done, there was just one more thing.

"Would you help me take off my dress, Rand?" Merile asked.

None of his *Far Dareis Mai* guard that day were among those he'd been intimate with, back when such things were permitted, but that such things had happened was not a secret even to the newly arrived Maidens. More importantly, Aviendha was standing right there, tall, strong faced, hard eyed, staring right at him. Even so, he stepped up behind Merile and began picking at the little buttons of her dress. His fingers only shook slightly. Brushing her black hair aside, he enjoyed the sight of her slim neck and fair skin and felt a stirring, but refused to allow temptation to rule him.

"There you go," he said, once her buttons were loosened, and resolutely stepped away. There was a mischievous twinkle in Merile's eyes as he turned his back again so she could change into Morsa's clothes. The Seanchan woman disappearing among the Aiel tents would not occasion comment, but her no longer being in the closet Rand had had set aside would make people wonder. Travelling might give him an advantage over an enemy that didn't know he could do it someday. Best to keep it secret as long as he could.

As Merile was readying herself, Nerise prepared the Maidens to move out. That the Sun Palace had been safe when they left didn't lessen her wariness one bit. He noticed Adelin standing and listening, not saying anything, and cocked his head.

"You don't seem to be taking charge the way you used to, Adelin. Is something wrong?"

The Maiden went very still, and then slowly turned and walked away from him. Aviendha plucked at his sleeve and leaned close to hiss. "You take such care with what is known of you; is it too much to ask that you take any care at all for what you say to others? Or to me?"

"What is the matter this time?" he whispered.

Aviendha tossed her head. "You should know better than this by now."

She stalked off, leaving him to wonder at her words.

"So now that I'm a fancy Seanchan lady, does that mean you have to do what I say, Rand?"

The dress didn't suit Merile, he saw on turning, though the smile certainly did. It would be a shame to hide it, but he pulled the cloth sack from his coat pocket anyway.

"Definitely not," he said as he carefully pulled it over her head.

"You rebel, you! The matriarchy demands your obedience!"

Rand rolled his eyes at her and yanked the hood down. "Burn me if they'll get it," he muttered over Merile's muffled giggles.

Seeing them ready, Nerise sent her Maidens out into the corridor. Aviendha waited for the Maiden's nod before taking Merile by the arm and leading her out. Rand went with them, of course, but his attention was more for the women beside him than the dangers ahead. Aviendha wasn't rough with Merile at all, he was surprised and pleased to see. And Merile, trusting soul that she was, proved quite willing to blindly—literally—leave her safety in her hands. He was mad to let his thoughts wander in such directions. And cruel besides. Yet forcing them back to more practical, and possible, things, proved beyond him that day.

CHAPTER 2: Relations



He remained distracted well into evening, when even the most curious noble had filtered out of the court of the Sun Palace. There had been no news of the clans sent to speed the Shaido on their way out of Cairhien as yet, and none was needed of those preparing to march south. There would be obstacles before them, though. Rivers and nations to cross. The latter of those was the more troubling, not because Andor or Ghealdan were in any position to oppose his forces, but because he was worried about what those forces would do if they were foolish enough to try.

The more immediate concern was Cairhien, however. It was a mess, and the obvious choice to fix it had turned him down. His gaze slid to Moiraine, hovering near the columns rather than whispering in his ear as he'd always imagined she would if he ever sat a throne. The dining chair he was sitting on was no throne, of course; it was just a chair that rested on a tall dais in a throne room that people came to hear his judgements in. Rand shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

Moiraine had been quiet in court, watching rather than offering advice. She'd changed lately, in more ways than one. She'd grown ... solemn. Not that she'd ever been an expressive woman, but there was something different about her now. He'd found himself watching her far more often than he should have. Accustomed to watching for even the slightest of hints—and reading far too much into them, by Rand's lights!—the *Daes Dae'mar* obsessed Cairhienin were sure to have wondered what he was thinking when he glanced her way.

He did not for a moment think they had guessed right. But wrong guesses could be troublesome in their own way. Lan was known to train with Rand at swordplay. And Jubes was a pretty girl. The Warder and the maid flanked Moiraine now, and it could be hoped that some had thought he was watching them instead.

"Still no representatives from House Damodred or House Riatin," he said.

It only took a look from Moiraine to send Maidens trotting to hustle out the remaining courtiers, secure the entries and make them private. Lan, Raine and the five Accepted made no move to leave, however, and neither did "Jasin Natael". Asmodean—to use his proper name—was looking rather pleased with himself these days, having shed his gleeman's cloak and taken up the position of Court Bard. Rand didn't see what there was to be pleased about. The man was a prisoner, whether in rags or in velvets. Captured and blackmailed into teaching Rand how to channel.

There was a long pause before Moiraine spoke, but when she did it was as if no time had passed. "No. And they will have learned you took the city by now."

"I'm a bit surprised it wasn't them it had to be taken from. The last time I visited Cairhien, they were the two biggest Houses. I was expecting them to fight over control of the city."

Now that there was no-one to see, Moiraine climbed the steps that led to the Sun Throne her aunt Laina had so spectacularly lost. "They did. Which is a sizable part of the reason they are no longer the most powerful Houses. It is dangerous to focus too much on your nearest rival. It can lead you to ignore other enemies, or rising powers, until it is too late. Damodred and Riatin spent much of their power and wealth trying to destroy each other during the civil war. They succeeded."

Rand hefted the cut off head of a Seanchan spear that he'd taken to carrying with him. He needed no lessons on the dangers of unseen enemies.

"Would I be right in assuming House Saighan have surpassed them?" Theodrin asked. "It is to Lady Colavaere that most of the Cairhienin nobles here gravitate, I have noticed."

Moiraine didn't look annoyed by the interjection. "You are correct, for the most part. Saighan's power waxes, but not alone. Aldorwin rivals them closely, and Taborwin have emerged as a surprise contender. Lord Dobraine offered patronage to many disenfranchised soldiers and armsmen, swelling his own ranks while preventing what would surely have been an up rise in banditry."

Lan nodded briefly. The Warder did not look to be paying much attention to their talk, but that meant little with him. He showed a fine unconcern for any offense the Maidens might take at the way

he paced the nearly empty throne room, trying to watch each door at once despite their already being guarded.

“Taborwin were contenders, you say?” The other two were strangers still, and so was Dobraine, but he’d met another Taborwin once. Not a friend exactly, or even someone he had reason to trust. But an acquaintance, at least.

“Of a sort,” said Moiraine. “They are not prestigious, their High Seat is male, and his heir is childless at an age at which being so raises questions. If Lady Breane prefers the company of women, as is whispered ... Well.”

He was a bit surprised. “Such things hardly matter to you.”

“No. One of my half-sisters lives a similar life. But that is irrelevant. A monarchy thrives on stability. Part of that requires the assurance of continuation. Heirs of competence. Without them, a monarch’s death would result in another civil war.”

Rand grunted softly. He was no admirer of monarchies. He also had good reason to doubt those whispers about Breane, but there was no reason to mention that.

“Fascinating,” drawled Ilyena, who rarely saw a reason not to mention something. She climbed the steps to the dais, ignoring Moiraine’s cold stare. “You should devote the rest of the year to learning how all these spoiled, I mean, gracious lords and ladies are related and who is more popular than who. I’m sure the other powers will have the decency to wait for you, Rand.”

“There’s room to do both,” Dani called. She remained with the Maidens ringing Rand. “Just so long as you don’t get too mired in it all.”

“She’s caught in the middle again,” said Ilyena. “Not that she minds that ...”

Dani’s cheeks darkened, Raine’s reddened, but Moiraine remained cool as ice. “I adjudge it less than a minute. From complaining of political boredom to chat befitting a tavern slattern. If you have nothing of value to contribute, Accepted, remain silent.”

Ilyena had lost much of her deference towards the Aes Sedai, but that public reminder of her true rank took her aback. While she was warily watching the nearby Maidens, Moiraine forged ahead.

“The heirs of Galldria and Barathanes remain in the field. They wait and hope for an opportunity to continue the fight. For that to come, you would need to pass through Cairhien rather than lingering. Do you mean to?” Much had changed between them. She had changed. But so had he. He said nothing, even then, even with her. After a long moment, she smiled a mysterious smile. “Then a swift addressing of the issue is advisable.”

Sulin, the leader of *Far Dareis Mai*, looked at him then. She was an old, sinewy woman, with white hair and pale blue eyes, yet there was casual murder in that look. Rand hastily shook his head. “Do you know these heirs? The Damodred one, at least,” he asked.

“I have said before, I am not close to my kin,” she said coolly. “Barathanes was succeeded by his younger sister. Caraline should have inherited long ago but *Daes Dae’mar* is *Daes Dae’mar*.”

“Your ... cousin, is it?”

“I told you that does not matter.”

Among the Maidens that guarded him was a lanky woman with red hair and a dissatisfied mouth. Harilin. A stranger once. A cousin now. Did that matter? Not as much as he’d once dreamed it would, but a bit, yes, still a bit.

There were some changes Rand liked. In his own life, and in Moiraine. “It’s an opportunity even so. And those should be seized. You are a Damodred. You can introduce me to them.”

She didn’t look very happy with the prospect but Moiraine was not one for letting her emotions cloud her judgement. There were good reasons to do this. Though little reason to linger here. He rose from his chair.

The Maidens gathered to him as he strode wordlessly through the court. Moiraine and the Accepted drifted after him as well, making a casual show of it. Pedra loudly praised Moiraine for making it possible for him to stay here in Cairhien, and lamented his lack of gratitude. Rand ignored her, as was his habit.

He made a show of his own as well, one of not looking too long at the Maidens, which was less a habit and more a necessity. Decisions had been made recently, and certain activities forbidden. As he watched cold-eyed Ani and the pretty but cruel Rhuana trot over, he felt a moment’s relief. It was probably for the best, since things had already gotten out of hand with them and might well have gotten worse if Sulin hadn’t put a stop to it. He had his regrets, though. There were a number of

women among the Maidens with whom he'd grown close, and would have liked to stay so. He didn't watch Rhamys or Tenelca march along at his side, since he didn't want to embarrass them, but he felt them there, so near and yet so far. And then there was an aspect that he knew was less savoury but couldn't help but feel. A lot of the Maidens from the formerly neutral clans were quite attractive, from the giant Caitlin to Rosalia of the Shiande with her pale red hair. Victa and Stef were Miagoma, young, yellow-haired and very pretty. If the nighttime adventures he'd once embarked on under the Roof of the Maidens had still been allowed, would they—and others like them—have taken part? Rand would have enjoyed that.

Most of the Miagoma and Shiande were off to the north, ensuring the Shaído didn't get up to more mischief. Most of the other clans were marching south, but the Wise Ones of all clans insisted on having representatives near Rand, to watch and influence him. That meant leaving spears behind as well, as an honourguard for the Wise Ones. For the most part, however, it was Taardad and Goshien who held the city. Those, and *Far Dareis Mai*. Chiefs and Wise Ones had had to interfere to ensure that the majority of the Maidens still ran with their clans. Even then, they were overrepresented among the Aiel around Rand these days.

Ayla, apprenticed now to Han's Wise One dreamwalker, had departed with the Tomanelle. The Wise Ones had been eager to see her out of Rand and Raine's influence, something he still wasn't sure had been, well, wise. How was she to learn to cope with becoming a wolfsister without help from another wolfkin? His arguments had fallen on deaf ears, however. It had been no surprise that Lidya chose to run with the spears after that. Hopefully she could find a way to help Ayla cope with the changes in her life. Lidya was off limits now, but did the same rules apply to apprentice Ayla?

Rand sighed quietly to himself. *Focus, al'Thor. You have more important things to be thinking about*, he told himself as he watched Rhamys surge ahead to push open the doors. He pulled his eyes away from her bottom, round enough to be seen moving even under the loose trousers of her *cadin'sor*.

Asmodean started playing an odd little ditty on his harp. Despite the elegant sounds he plucked from the strings, there was something mocking about the tune to Rand's ears. The secret Forsaken did not meet his narrowed eyes, just watched him from the corners of his own dark ones, as usual. He didn't stop playing, however. Would the betrayal come now or later, Rand wondered. He'd squeezed a lot of knowledge about channelling *saidin* out of Asmodean so far, but there was a lot more that he still wanted. He'd regret having to kill him. The chambers Asmodean had been assigned were within the Tower of the Risen Sun, where Rand was staying, but as far away from Rand's own chambers as possible. Close enough to be protected by the Maidens from those who wanted him dead, but close enough that the Maidens would be protecting Rand from him, too. Wards, inverted wards, would be advisable.

Moiraine spoke quietly to Jubes, who made a show of her shrug and strode off, only to stop in a hall, looking lost. She was an orphan they'd picked up at Taíen, and often looked lost that way.

Pedra excused herself—to Moiraine, of course—as they approached Rand's tower, and made a point of linking arms with Mayam and Theodrin as she left. Dani, Ilyena and Moiraine herself were seemingly beyond saving, in her eyes. Rand couldn't help but smile.

Ilyena noticed it, too, and her smile was even sharper than his. "Oh dear, Moiraine. The Tower's faithful has such low expectations these days. I wonder what the rest of the faithful will say, when they learn what you've been doing. And with whom."

A slow cold stare was Moiraine's only response. The Volsuni got some hotter looks from the Maidens, for shame was a pretty big deal to Aiel and such things were not to be spoken of in public, by their lights. It was so in the Theren, too, but Rand had drunk deep of that shame over the years and developed an immunity.

The Maidens at the entrance to his section of the palace greeted him on sight, though not all were known to him. It still felt bizarre to Rand, being recognised by total strangers. One of them, a round-faced and big-eyed girl no older than himself was all smiles as she asked after his day. He'd never seen her before in his life.

"It was fine," he said with strained politeness. "How was yours?"

"Boring!" she said with a laugh. "I am Misha. You look just like I imagined!"

"I do?" Rand said dubiously. What did she mean? A wetlander? He wasn't going to try to look like anything else.

"Uh huh. The spearsisters said—"

Several of those spearsisters hissed at her, and a more familiar Maiden, Carwe, took her by the arm and whispered something furiously in her ear. Carwe was often furious, in Rand's experience. He took advantage of her distraction to escape the conversation.

He dismissed Asmodean as soon as they passed the tower's threshold, and his Maiden escort dispersed to join the sentries on duty. As soon as they were gone, Raine took up their role and started prowling around with her hands on the hilts of her long knives. Though short and skinny she did not look at all comical to him. He'd seen her kill more than her fair share of Shadowspawn. Only when they were relatively private did Moiraine speak.

"I fear your time in that dungeon has addled your wits. In other circumstances I would be sympathetic, but these circumstances are uniquely crucial and we cannot afford to indulge your erratic behaviour. Find your balance, Volsuni. The Light depends on it."

Ilyena could not meet her eyes. "You don't know what you are talking about."

"I know more than anyone realises," said Moiraine. Rand smiled whimsically, reminded of the woman who had come to Emond's Field that fateful Winternight.

Ilyena hadn't been there for that, though, and wasn't impressed. "It's pretty funny, being looked down on by someone who is taking the same cock as me."

Dani gasped. "Ilyena!"

Moiraine neither gasped nor blushed. "So you think that has changed something. Interesting." After a moment's pause, she turned her attention to Rand. "If you hope to bring Riatin and Damodred to heel, you will need to understand the history of the conflict between them." She glided off, her serene composure making Rand feel unnatural and ungainly in his height as he followed her up the stairs of the Tower of the Risen Sun towards his chambers. He had a hard time concentrating on her lesson, for thoughts of what might happen there kept disrupting his concentration. She had left Lan behind. That usually presaged something. Not that Lan was as outraged by what took place between Rand and his Aes Sedai now as he had been when it first started. For good or ill.

Raine darted up the stairs ahead of them all, to check for threats. Dani and Ilyena, following behind, had no interest in Riatin and Damodred at all. "I can't believe you sometimes," he heard Dani hiss. "The Tower annoys me plenty, but for the Light's sake, Ilyena. There are ways to rebel."

"The Tower doesn't annoy me. She does," Ilyena muttered.

"I don't understand."

Ilyena chuckled darkly. "You get it, don't you, Rand? I remember the way you were."

He paused at a landing to look back at her. And stayed there, staring, as an unfamiliar voice slithered into his mind.

Remember and know the price of opposing Shai'tan, Lews Therin said miserably. A silent scream forced Rand to wince. *ILYENA!* Ilyena, the other Ilyena, was staring back at him. She looked confused. Hurt? They were different women, they just shared a name, but merely thinking that name was so often enough to make Lews Therin weep and rage. Rand jerked his gaze away from the Volsuni's big blue eyes and resumed his climb. How was he to get the dead man out of his head? He didn't dare ask Moiraine for advice. She'd think he was mad.

The Accepted followed in silence after that, perhaps listening to Moiraine's lecture as closely as Rand did. He liked her suggestion about subverting the High Seats. Lower ranked members of the Houses might be more inclined to be loyal to Rand, if he propped them up in place of their cousins. It might also start up internal wars, though, and the last thing he wanted was more needless war.

He asked her about the potential replacements nonetheless, and they were still discussing it when they caught up with Raine at the door to Rand's room. The talk died down when he opened the door to find Merile waiting within, sitting at the foot of his bed wearing nothing save for a sheer white nightdress. Her welcoming smile vanished when she saw the other women who'd accompanied him.

"Uh oh. Um. There was important news I had to tell you, Rand. Ah ... Loial says he wants to go to the *stedding*," she said, a bit unconvincingly.

Moiraine shook her head but did not acknowledge her further. "Neither of my sisters is suited to leadership," she went on, "but Innloine's children might serve. She has many, as she always wanted. I have never met them, however, so cannot speak as to their characters."

"That's ... that's good to know," Rand said, looking between the two women. He cleared his throat. The answer would do for both, he supposed. Loial had already told him of his plans to visit a *stedding* soon. It was no real surprise, the Ogier Longing being what it was.

“Knowing the characters of rulers great and small is greatly advantageous. I will assist as I can, but there will come a time when you must learn to ferret out such details yourself.” Moiraine pursed her lips for a moment. “Perhaps Thom Merrilin might help with that.” For whatever reason, that brought a wan smile to her face.

Unbuckling his swordbelt, Rand sat on the blue sofa, his back covering the rising sun embroidered upon it. As he was taking off his boots, he couldn’t help but notice how very not alone he was. Dani and Ilyena had closed the door, but with themselves on the inside. Neither woman interrupted Moiraine, but neither did they seem eager to leave. Merile still perched on the bed, and Raine padded over to her uncertainly.

“Should we draw lots?” Merile asked the wolfsister in a too-loud whisper.

Rand had drunk deep of improprieties over the years, but even he could blush.

* * *

There was no crass flexing of muscles or exchanging of shouts, but the room was full of challenge even so. The girls kept their faces still but the eyes told it all, even when they looked at Moiraine. Some of them might even have taken the foolish Tinker up on her suggestion. Not Moiraine, of course, no more than she would tolerate them getting between her and her mission. She looked at Rand, almost overtopping her even when seated, his broad shoulders filling the sofa. He had proven good at filling things, to her delight and dismay. Men that handsome were usually vain, but not him. He was blushing like the inexperienced boy he certainly was not. Her mission? Self-deception was beneath her. It was what she wanted that she would not tolerate them getting in the way of.

Fools and failures waited for the perfect moment, or for victory to be handed them. Moiraine was neither. Her steps were graceful yet swift as she went to sit beside Rand. Calmly she smoothed her embroidered blue dress, ensuring she looked her best. Just as calmly did she lay her hand atop his thigh. “The world is in a constant state of change, especially now. The rulers I could tell you of may no longer rule by the time you come into contact with their nations. New rulers rise especially quickly during times of turmoil.” She let her hand move up, touching him with her fingertips alone, and smiled slightly when she felt the evidence of her observation’s accuracy.

Rand swallowed, very red in the face now, and looked about him guiltily. That wouldn’t do. Moiraine was unthreatened by the others. She was sure she could send them away if she tried. Which she should. And yet ... Ilyena had not been the only one to imagine it was otherwise. There had been no shortage of defiance shown in the months before she chose to gamble on this path either. That defiance had become uncertainty since, and not just from Rand. The thought of addressing it made her heart beat uncommonly fast.

Though unpractised in amorous encounters with men, Moiraine undid his breeches with deft alacrity. Dani stirred at the sight.

“Uh, Rand? There was something I wanted to discuss with you. In ... in pri—”

Her words were strangled by the sight that Moiraine unveiled. Or perhaps by seeing Moiraine unveil it. Dani had betrayed the White Tower’s principles long before Moiraine found herself obliged to do so, and for no more reason than desire and ill discipline. Desire she could understand. The hot, thick shaft that she wrapped her hand around was no artist’s ideal of beauty, but it held a primal fascination to her. Strange that she should feel so powerful, holding it like that. Rand’s eyes were as wide as those of a deer caught in an open field by the queen’s hunt.

“Queen Ketricken of Volsung is a noble woman and worthy of trust. Humble as well. Do not let this one colour your expectations of her people.” She did not smile when she looked at Ilyena, but the way the girl coloured and seethed was most gratifying. Moiraine ran her hand up and down Rand’s member slowly, and made his plaything watch. It was more thrilling than she’d expected. Her heart raced. Her voice remained calm. “But who can say whether Ketricken will still be queen tomorrow?”

“You could be queen,” he husked.

She refused to be diverted by that. She had already given him his answer. Instead she smiled seductively. “Oh? And what throne would you offer me?” A hooded glance at his lap was all it took to have his hands reaching for her. Let them see that, too. But Moiraine was no slave to desire, and there were yet lessons to be taught. Her hand on his chest was barely enough to hold him back, but help was nearby.

“Control yourself, you naughty boy,” she teased. Ilyena’s hands were in fists, and Dani was shifting from foot to foot as though she didn’t know whether to leave or interfere. One of the others would serve her purpose better. She had brought them out of the Theren with her, though they had made plain that they had only come out of loyalty to Rand. Let them prove it now. “Raine. Come over here and deal with this situation.”

Hearing her steady words, held by her steady stare, the wolfsister was already within reach before she blinked herself back to a semblance of wit and asked, “What situation?”

“This distraction,” she answered patiently. “Use your mouth, girl. Mine is busy with more important things.”

Dani gasped. “You! Raine ... you, you don’t—”

But Raine was already on her knees, her hands replacing Moiraine’s on Rand’s shaft, her open mouth descending towards his tip. While Rand drew in a shuddering breath, Moiraine gave the wolfsister a kind pat on her curly head and told her how good a girl she was. All while looking Dani in the eye. She was a fine woman, in many ways, and would make a fine Aes Sedai. But there was a rough future ahead of her, once the sisters learned of how badly she had strayed. Better if she realised that now, before she made things worse for herself by, Light forbid, marrying him or bearing his child. The White Tower always got its way in the end.

“The Volsuni royals pride themselves on their humility,” she went on. Neither of the Accepted dared interrupt her, nor could they match her poise. “Self-sacrifice is the greatest of virtues in their eyes. It is a curious trait. It both inspires loyalty from their people and renders them vulnerable to their enemies. Their dynasty has flirted with extinction on several occasions but somehow managed to survive so far.”

Rand was having a hard time focusing on her words, but he tried his best. “Self-sacrifice is my destiny,” he gasped. A mumbled denial came from below and Raine began moving her mouth along his length even faster. “The Volsuni must know the Prophecies. Will that help me win them over?”

Moiraine smiled slightly. “I have no doubt it will. Provided you don’t do anything extremely foolish you should have little difficulty winning the Volsuni, or the other Borderlanders, to your banner.”

Ilyena made a noise, and Moiraine looked at her, wondering if she’d point out the conflict of interest that might arise should the White Tower not endorse him. She herself would not, knowing how suspicious Rand was already. And Ilyena did not, for her own inscrutable reasons.

Rand’s eyes had drifted shut. “That’s good,” he breathed.

Moiraine laughed lightly. “I can tell. This pet of yours, have you considered getting a proper leash for her?”

Raine’s eyes snapped open. They were liquid gold, so pretty and so loyal. She stared up at them, her focus darting between Rand and the Aes Sedai; her mouth didn’t stop moving, but she knew her alarm even so.

He reached down to run his thumb lightly across her soft cheek and sent Moiraine a frown of rebuke. “She’s a girl, Moiraine. Not a pet. No-one’s putting a leash on her.” He hesitated, biting his lip. “Unless she asks them to.”

The girl in question redoubled her efforts to bring Rand to climax. Her hands cupped his balls gently and her tongue seemed intent on touching every inch of his cock. The golden eyes that stared up into his gleamed with adoration. While Rand smiled down at her, Moiraine wondered at the lack of scandalized reactions. It would seem such games were not unheard of among this group.

She nodded to herself. “Good. A great many men, if they found themselves in your position, would revel in the idea of leashes and domination, sparing no thought for anyone’s desires but their own. Do not lose that which you are now in the days to come, and you will do well.”

Moiraine rose from her seat and twitched up her skirts. “And now I think you are ready enough.” She arched a brow at the *Tuatha’an*, who watched in wide-eyed silence. “My hands are full, Merile. Come rid me of these.”

She gulped noisily. “R-rid you ... of, of ...”

“My underwear, yes,” Moiraine said, patient yet implacable. “I intend to take your man tonight, and I can hardly do that while wearing them. Come and undress me, girl.”

Her cheeks reddened, and she trembled visibly. There was a long pause, but the girl who had refused the Tower’s call, and who had plainly come here with something else in mind, padded over on

bare feet and put her trembling hands upon Moiraine's hips. When she gave her underwear a tug and let them fall down her slender legs to pool around her ankles, Moiraine felt a rush far beyond what being exposed in such a manner should cause.

"You may sit there and watch," she told Merile, as she stepped out of her underwear. "I will show you how a woman does such things."

She waited until the trembling girl perched herself on the sofa before rapping her knuckles rudely on the crown of Raine's head and lifting one leg high enough to throw it over Rand's hips. As soon as she straddled him, she let her bunched skirts come to rest around them, hiding all her flesh except for her pale legs. She had no need to show off her body, or compete with these others, some of whom were taller and more curvaceous than she. She commanded Rand's eyes with hers. Raine she did not even need to command. Her mouth abandoned Rand's member but he did not stay unattended for long. The wolfsister loyally held him steady as Moiraine sank herself down upon him, taking him slowly inside. Her pussy stretched to allow him passage, and cried out in joy as he touched every inch of her on his journey within. Years of training and self-discipline prevented Moiraine from crying out as well, but the long sigh that escaped her lips must surely have betrayed some of her pleasure. As he let out a satisfied sigh of his own she spared a thought for what Raine must be seeing; from where she knelt she would have a very close view of Moiraine's bottom and pussy as she took Rand's thick length inside her. Scandalous indeed. But let her watch. Let them all watch and wait their turns.

She rode Rand slowly, experience having taught her that it was the only way to keep him from becoming too excited to concentrate on her lecture as they made love. "It has occurred to me, during our visit to the Waste, that your time among the Aiel might serve as good practice for any future dealings with the Borderlands. The customs and values are not completely the same of course, neither among Aiel and Borderlanders nor even among the various nations *of* the Borderlands, but there is a certain similarity in theme. All five nations, like the Aiel, value honour highly and treat shame as a greater terror than pain or loss. Which is not at all the case in the more southerly nations, especially not in Cairhien. Mark that last well and remember it well in your dealings here." She looked him straight in the eyes as she rode his sex, her hands resting atop his broad shoulders. She glanced aside at Merile once, and found her sitting very still, chewing on her lower lip, that sheer nightdress doing little to hide the stiffness of her nipples.

"But as I was saying, the Aiel's code of *ji'e'toh*, is much more elaborate and regimented than the customs of the Borderlands, but if you can come to work with them without giving murderous offense, deliberately or otherwise, then you should have little difficulty navigating Borderlander politics. I think—Ahh!"

A sudden shock of pleasure ran up Moiraine's spine. It was no orgasm—that she would have felt coming. Though caught by surprise, she knew at once the source of the ambush. Something warm and wet was touching the sensitive flesh that ringed her bottom. The rise and fall of her hips slowed greatly and she fell forward, her head resting on Rand's shoulder. She tried and failed to silence her gasps as she was tongued. He leaned forward curiously and peered down past the pearl buttons on the back of her dress and over the cheeks of her bottom to where she knew he would find a red-haired girl pressing her face into Moiraine's crack and licking eagerly at what she found there.

She saw him blush, and couldn't help but echo his reaction. Her heart echoed his, too, which was thundering against her chest. Eagerly, he took hold of her slender hips and held her steady while he took charge of their rutting, thrusting up into her from where he sat. With Moiraine held in place like that, Raine's tongue had little difficulty locating and teasing her ass. Between them they soon broke Moiraine's precious reserve, wringing loud cries of pleasure from her wide open mouth.

The lessons she had thought to teach, to Rand and the others, were a distant memory. There was only pleasure. She came quick and she came hard, her pussy clutching at the intrusive guest that she no longer wanted to leave. Dimly she was aware that she had thrown back her head and was making noises that no Aes Sedai should make. Rand didn't seem to mind, though, far from it. His blue eyes shone and his grip had tightened painfully. He was ramming into her in a way that hurt, but she didn't think to make him stop. She had never thought to find such passion in her life. There was a glorious heat of life within her now, at this most inopportune of times, so much so that it took a moment before she realised that Rand had spilled his own heat and life within her, too.

They grew still but Raine did not. The circling of her tongue made time with the waves of pleasure that shivered Moiraine's body, slowing each time, like the beats of her heart. Eventually the

waves stopped coming, and the tongue's touch ceased. Raine stood to look at the pair of them. Well, to glance shyly at Moiraine and then stare at Rand really. It was only when he blinked himself back to awareness that she grinned. He reached out a trembling hand towards hers and when she put her callused palm in his he gave it a gentle squeeze.

"I'll attend to you shortly, Raine," he mumbled breathlessly. "I just need a little rest first."

Raine smiled and shook her head. "She's your first bitch, Shadowkiller. It's only right that you fuck her more than me. I don't mind waiting for my turn."

She sniffed. "Do not think that that, admittedly enjoyable performance, has won you more than it has."

Raine nodded solemnly. "You're the first bitch. I won't challenge you, I bare my throat."

Moiraine raised her brow warningly. "Do not call me by that term."

"What term?" the wolfsister said, and she actually sounded genuinely confused.

Moiraine sighed.

Before she could frame a response, Raine spoke again. "Are you going to take me now? To make it official I mean. Should I get on my hands and knees for you? Or would you like me to lick you instead?" Her golden eyes were wide and guileless and Moiraine could detect not a hint of mockery in her tone.

Years of training in Tar Valon spared Moiraine from blurting out some comment on the girl's sanity or asking her whether she had been raised by animals. That last would have been especially difficult since she suspected that Raine had been, for all intents and purposes.

"For the Light's sake, Raine. That's got nothing to do with, with this sort of thing," Dani said.

Naive. Power ran through everything in life, even if only in the smallest ways. What was done in bed could ripple into other facets of life. She thought Rand understood. Why else would he have made such a point of taking all her holes the first time she'd given in and become his lover? She stirred in Rand's lap. He'd shrunk but not enough to leave her yet. If she had her way, he would stay there all night. She started rolling her hips. Perhaps Rand was not the only one in need of lessons. She ran her fingers through his hair as she whispered in his ear, telling him how much she wanted him, urging him to fill her again; words meant only for him to hear. His pulse raced against her lips, proof enough of the effect she was having even before she felt him expand within her.

"Take me to bed," she said, louder now. Strong hands closed upon her hips. He lifted her easily, and took her where she wanted to be taken.

The bed was soft against her back, but she bounced only once before tearing at his clothes. He was eager to help her, eager to press his skin against hers. As soon as she had rid him of his coat and shirt, she pushed his breeches down. She knew the others would be able to see the thick muscles of his back and his taut, hairless bottom, and expected they would enjoy the sight as much as she had on other occasions. So she was watching as she exposed him, and saw the way their eyes dipped, saw the blushing stillness in which they stood. Her hand closed upon his bottom as she pulled him down and in, and she smiled over his shoulder from more than the pleasure he brought her. That hand was proprietary, and blocked their sight as well.

"You girls feel free to sit in the corner and play with yourselves while you watch," she said.

Dani was darker of skin than Ilyena, but not so dark that Moiraine couldn't tell that she flushed just as hotly as her pillow friend at those words. While Ilyena stood in tight-fisted impotence, Dani marched for the door. Rand didn't notice, he was going wild, his hips bucking hard against Moiraine's and forcing her to moan. The sound made Dani halt before the closed door. She turned slowly, arms crossed in defiance, yet her hands were tight, not in fists, but upon her breasts. She stood there, feet shifting, as she watched her man fuck her senior with blind passion.

Moiraine's own passion was growing fast, but it did not cloud her thoughts so badly they she did not note the oddity that was Ilyena Volnicoliev. So rebellious. So rude. Yet she had not followed her friend to the door, and the defiance Dani tried to show was nowhere to be seen on the other Accepted's face. A fitting acceptance was there instead, a bitter sadness. She was a puzzle Moiraine hoped to have time to solve.

Merile, on the other hand, was a puzzle to no-one. She had done exactly as she was told, and hitched up her nightdress. Her small hand worked her sex now, without even the decency to be embarrassed at doing so in front of others, or while watching Rand with another woman. It was a pity she had rejected the Tower. She would have made a fine Novice. She would likely become one

eventually, of course, whether she wanted to or not, but her time in white would be rather less pleasant now, having done as she did.

All four of them watched as Moiraine took Rand. They saw her wrap her legs tight around his rocking waist, and scratch his broad shoulders with her nails. They watched sweat begin to glisten upon their joined bodies. They heard her shudder around his thick cock, once, twice, thrice. And none of them dared interfere. Lessons had been quite thoroughly taught that night, by the time the reservoir she had drained was replenished and Rand crushed her breasts against his chest and growled his climax. Moiraine clutched at his straining bottom once more, holding him inside her until every last drop had been claimed.

It was only as they were lying there, catching their breaths, that she noticed that Merile's ministrations had come to an end. Ilyena was sat beside her on the sofa, looking defeated. When the Tinker set a hesitant hand upon her knee, she batted it aside. Raine had knelt at the foot of the bed and watched the whole thing, but Dani remained by the door. The Domani was clutching at her breasts still, plainly aroused, and just as plainly too stubborn and proud to do anything about it.

Merile was not so foolish that she didn't notice. She rose from the sofa and went to her.

"Let me help you," she said, before kneeling and starting to hitch up the older girl's skirts.

"Merile? Y-you don't have to ... I, I mean ... We've n-never ..."

She looked up at her shyly. "I wasn't sure you wanted to. But I can help now. I want to. You've done so much to help me, let me help you."

The hands that had been rather weakly resisting Merile's advance fell away entirely. Up went the skirts and down came the underwear. As soon as the way was clear, Merile went to work with a gusto that belied her seeming innocence. Dani bit a knuckle in a vain effort to silence herself.

Moiraine smiled, in part at how pretty a sight they were, and in part at the thrill of it all. Making them watch was one thing. Making them watch and like it ... That set her heart to racing. She might well have taken Rand again, but she doubted even *his* stamina would have been enough for a third rutting. Her breathing had steadied, at least. She caressed his back gently.

"You just can't get enough of my pussy, can you, Rand?" she teased. Dani opened her eyes to see them once more.

"I love it," she heard him confess.

"I can tell," she said, while gauging how far she could push. It would be a humiliating defeat if she tried to get him to say she was his favourite and he refused. Even if it were so—and an unworthy part of her wanted to believe it was—he was too kind and fair-minded to say it in front of the others. No. She had done enough, made the point that needed making. There was no need to be cruel. "You can tell, too, can't you, Dani?"

Rand turned in time to see her hand come to rest atop Merile's head, watch her blush darkly and squeeze her own breast, and listen as she came in his girl's face. He looked surprised, but the way he chewed on his lower lip was certainly not born of disgust.

"Thank you, Merile," Dani groaned, when she'd stopped shaking. "You're very good. I mean, you're good in general. But you're good at that, too."

"Aww. Thanks!" the girl said, hopping happily to her feet. "Raine taught me. Didn't you, Raine?"

Golden eyes blinked at her. "I did? I thought you were teaching me."

"Isn't that sweet? We're all friends now," Ilyena said darkly.

Rand turned to look at her and for a moment she thought he might say something, but then she felt him flinch in her arms and, well, legs and sex for that matter. He turned his face away from Ilyena, one marked and branded hand going to his head. Physical lassitude and emotional satisfaction were nowise near enough to make her overlook such a reaction. There was something wrong. Madness? She searched his face with a concern devoid of the detachment an Aes Sedai should have. That girl's name alone was fraught with trouble, for this man of all men. He had to hold on long enough.

And she? She had to learn when to let go.

CHAPTER 3: *Stalked by Shadow*



For what seemed the hundredth time, Nynaeve held a lock of her hair up to look at it and sighed. Thick murmurs of talk and laughter from hundreds if not thousands of throats, distant music that was nearly drowned out, drifted in through the inn walls. She had not minded spending the morning indoors, away from her travelling companions—occasional peeks through the window had convinced her that she would just as soon not be out in those packed crowds, yelling and barely making way for the wagons—but every time she looked at the brassy red of her hair, she wished she had been doing something other than dyeing it.

It couldn't be helped, though. They were being hunted by the Forsaken and the Black Ajah. And enough people had already suffered for Nynaeve's recklessness. Her hands had started braiding of their own accord. She forced them to stop. Loose would make for a better disguise, even if it did make her feel like a little girl. Not that any good Theren girl would be found wearing an Altaran dress like the one she was wearing, with the scandalous oval cut out over her bosom. That, too, was just a concession to the need for disguise.

Sighing, she wrapped a dark shawl across her shoulders to hide her indecency, got up from the lumpy bed, and went to let herself out. Elayne had mentioned wanting to replenish supplies before moving on, but if Nynaeve didn't find her and take charge the girl would probably end up buying half the town. The inn—neat but humble—had been Nynaeve's choice, though the thin-lipped innkeeper showed no gratitude for the custom as she passed her on the way out. Some women just couldn't handle good advice.

Tossing back her virulent red locks, Nynaeve stepped into the street with a scowl ready to fire at any fool who dared stare. No-one did, however. They were all too busy bustling about on who knew what business.

It was a prosperous, busy town, Jurador, with stone-paved streets, most of them wide and all lined with stone buildings roofed in reddish tiles. Houses and inns rubbed shoulders with stables and taverns, in a noisy jumble with a blacksmith's clanging hammer on an anvil here and the racketing of a rugweaver's looms there, and everywhere, it seemed, coopers hammering bands on tight barrels for transporting salt. Hawkers cried pins and ribbons, meat pies and roasted nuts from trays, or winter-wrinkled turnips and sorry plums from barrows. On every street men and women stood guard over the display goods on narrow tables in front of their shops and bellowed lists of what was offered within.

Picking out the salt merchants' houses was easy, though, three stories of stone rather than two, covering eight times as much ground as any others, each with a columned walk overlooking the street and shielded by white wrought-iron screens between the columns. The lower windows on most houses had those screens, though not always painted. The upper windows as well on the homes of the wealthy, most of whom were no doubt salt merchants. This place was more accustomed to thievery than her home.

That much was reminiscent of Ebou Dar, but little else was, beyond the olive complexions of the people. There were no deep necklines exposing cleavage here, no skirts sewn up to display coloured petticoats. The women wore embroidered dresses with high necks right up to their chins, a little embroidery for the common folk, a great deal for the richer, who wore cloaks embroidered top to bottom and sheer veils hanging over their faces from combs of gold-work or carved ivory stuck into dark, coiled braids. The men's short coats were worked almost as thickly, in colours just as bright, and rich or poor, most men wore a long belt knife with a blade a little less curved than those in Ebou Dar. Rich or poor, the fellows did have a tendency to fondle their knife hilts as if expecting a fight, so maybe that was the same.

The Lady Aethelaine's palace appeared no different from the outside than the salt merchants' mansions, but it was located on the town's main square, a wide expanse of polished stone where a broad round marble fountain sprayed water into the air. People filled their buckets and big pottery water jars from pipes spilling into stone basins at the corners of other squares, though. The big

fountain put out a smell of brine. It was a symbol of Jurador's wealth, pumped from the same source as the salt wells in the surrounding hills. Nynaeve got to see a fair bit of the town before she found her companions.

They were in disguise as well, of course. The Shienaran soldiers had shed their armour and most of their weapons, and hidden their shaved heads beneath some silly-looking Altaran caps. All the women had dyed their hair, fair-haired Keestis now having the long black locks the likes of which the newly reddish Shimoku had once worn. It was the Shienaran leader, Ragan, who saw her first, and his smile quickly became a frown.

"Peace. Why did you come out on your own? We would have come back once we were done. Wandering these streets alone is dangerous," he said in a low voice once she came near, shooting a narrow glare at the passing Altarans.

"I don't need your permission to leave my room, Master Ragan Fanwar," Nynaeve said, but somehow she couldn't find the anger his presumption deserved. She'd always known he and the other men would try to take charge, and make a mess of things for her. So she'd taken the proper steps to prevent that trouble from arising. But now the best she could give him was half a frown. Next thing the man would want to pack her and Elayne in wool and sit them on a shelf! *Wouldn't it be best if someone did?* a tiny voice asked. *Haven't you caused enough trouble going your own way?* She told the voice to be quiet. It did not listen, but began listing disasters and near disasters sprung from her own stubbornness.

"You certainly don't. But I question why you bothered, since we are all set to head right back."

Nynaeve just sighed. The others stared while she stood there with her head lowered, and it was a good while before they set off again. She didn't respond when Keestis asked if she was okay. That one would probably just blame her for not killing Moghedien when she had the chance again.

By the time they arrived back at the Salty Lad, the rest of their companions had already gathered in the common room. Ragan reported to Elayne, whose curious glances Nynaeve found almost as hard to face as Birgitte Silverbow's direct blue gaze. It was that last that drove her from the room. Of all the mistakes she had made, Birgitte was perhaps the worst.

While the others organised for the continuation of their journey to Salidar, Nynaeve spent the afternoon alone in her room. She'd sunk into a listless comfort when the door suddenly slammed open and Birgitte let herself in without so much as asking.

Birgitte wore a red dress now, totally unconscious of the low square neck. Her black-dyed braid was pulled over her shoulder so it nestled between her breasts. Just looking at her made Nynaeve fold her shawl tighter; Birgitte could not show a fingernail more of pale bosom and retain the slightest claim to decency. As it was, such a claim would be feeble, really quite laughable. Looking at her made Nynaeve's stomach knot up, but not for reasons of clothes or skin.

"If you are going to wear the dress, why cover up?" Birgitte came inside and closed the door behind her. "You are a woman. Why not be proud of it?"

"If you think I shouldn't," Nynaeve replied hesitantly, and slowly let the shawl slide down to her elbows, revealing the gap in her dress's front. She felt all but naked. "I only thought ... I thought ..." Gripping her silk skirts hard to keep her hands at her sides, she held her gaze on the other woman.

Birgitte grimaced. "And if I wanted you to widen the gap another inch?"

Nynaeve opened her mouth, face going as scarlet as the gown, but for a moment nothing came out. When it did, she sounded as if she were being strangled. "There isn't an inch to widen it. There isn't a tenth!"

Three quick, frowning strides, and Birgitte bent slightly to put her face right in Nynaeve's. "And if I said I wanted you to rid yourself of that inch?" she snarled, showing teeth. "What if I wanted to paint your face, so you could entertain us all like some fool? What if I stripped you out of it altogether and painted you from head to toe? A fine sight you would make then. Every man inside fifty miles would come to see."

Nynaeve's mouth worked, but this time no sound emerged at all. She wanted very much to close her eyes; maybe when she opened them, none of this would be happening.

With a disgusted shake of her head, Birgitte took a seat on one of the beds, one elbow on her knee and her blue eyes sharp. "This must stop. When I look at you, you flinch. You run about waiting on me hand and foot. If I glance for a stool, you fetch one. If I lick my lips, you have a cup of wine in

my hands before I know I am thirsty. You would wash my back and put the slippers on my feet if I let you. I am neither monster nor invalid nor child, Nynaeve.”

“I am only trying to make up for—” she began timidly, and jumped when the other woman roared.

“Make up? You are trying to make me less!”

“No. No, it is not that, truly. I am to blame—”

“You take responsibility for my actions,” Birgitte broke in fiercely. “I chose to speak to you in *Tel’aran’rhiod*. I chose to help you. I chose to track Moghedien. And I chose to take you to see her. Me! Not you, Nynaeve, me! I was not your puppet, your pack hound, then, and I will not be now.”

Nynaeve swallowed hard and gripped her skirts more tightly. She had no right to be angry with this woman. No right at all. But Birgitte had every right. “You did what I asked. It is my fault that you ... that you are here. It is all my fault!”

“Have I mentioned fault? I see none. Only men and dim-witted girls take blame where there is none, and you are neither.”

“It was my foolish pride that made me think I could best her again, and my cowardice that let her ... that let her ... If I had not been so afraid I could not spit, I might have done something in time.”

“A coward?” Birgitte’s eyes widened, openly incredulous, and scorn touched her voice. “You? I thought you had more sense than to confuse fear with cowardice. You could have fled *Tel’aran’rhiod* when Moghedien released you, but you stayed to fight. No fault or blame to you that you could not.” Drawing a deep breath, she rubbed her forehead for a moment, then leaned forward intently again. “Listen to me close, Nynaeve. I take no blame for what was done to you. I saw, but I could not twitch. Had Moghedien tied you into a knot or cored you like an apple, still I would take no blame. I did what I could, when I could. And you did the same.”

“It was not the same.” Nynaeve tried to take the heat out of her voice. “It was my fault that you were there. My fault that you are here. If you ...” She stopped to swallow again. “If you ... miss ... if you were to *accidentally* shoot me, I want you to know that I will understand.”

“I do not miss where I aim,” Birgitte said dryly, “and where I aim will not be at you.” She began taking things from one of the pack at the foot of her bed and laying them on the small table. Half-finished arrows, scraped shafts, steel arrow points, stone glue pot, fine cord, grey goose feathers for fletchings. She had said she would make her own bow, too, as soon as she could. The one that Ragan had given her she called “a knot-riddled branch broken from a cross-grained tree by a blind idiot in the middle of the night”.

“I liked you, Nynaeve,” she said as she laid everything out. “Thorns, warts and all. I no longer do, as you are now ...”

“You have no reason to like me, now,” Nynaeve said miserably, but the other woman spoke right over her without looking up.

“... and I will not allow you to make me less, to make my decisions less, by claiming responsibility for them. I have had few women friends, but most have had tempers like snowghosts.”

“I wish you could be my friend once more.” What under the Light was a snowghost? Something from another Age, no doubt. “I would never try to make you less, Birgitte. I only—”

Birgitte paid her no mind, except to raise her voice. Her attention seemed all on her arrow shafts. “I would like to like you again, whether you return the liking or not, but I cannot until you are yourself again. I could live with you a milk-tongued snivelling wretch if that was what you were. I take people as they are, not as I would like them to be, or else I leave them. But that is not what you are, and I will not accept your reasons for playing at it. So. Elayne has told me of the things you used to do to wayward girls back in your Emond’s Field. Now I know what to do the next time you claim my decisions as your own.” She swished a length of ashwood vigorously, like a switch.

Nynaeve forced her jaws to unclench, forced her tone as smooth as she could make it. “You have a perfect right to do whatever you wish to me.” Her fists in her skirts quivered more than her voice.

“A touch of temper showing? Just at the edges?” Birgitte grinned at her, at once amused and startlingly feral. “How long before it bursts into flame? I am willing to wear out any number of switches, if need be.” The grin faded into seriousness. “I will make you see the right of this, or I will drive you away. There is no other course. I cannot—will not—leave Elayne. That bond honours me and I will honour it, and her. And I will not allow you to think that you make my decisions, or made

them. I am myself, not an appendage to you. Now go away. I must finish these arrows if I am to have even a few shafts that will fly true." Unstopping the glue pot, she bent over the table. "Do not forget to curtsy like a good girl on your way out."

Nynaeve made it as far as the end of the hallway before pounding her fist on her thigh in a fury. How dare the woman? Did she think that she could just ...? Did she think that Nynaeve would put up with ...? *I thought she could do anything she wanted to you*, a small voice whispered in her head. *I said she could kill me*, she snarled at it, *not humiliate me!* Before much longer everybody would be threatening her!

She didn't want to return to the common room, but it was that or stand in the hall waiting for Birgitte to be done. So she marched to the corner table that the others were gathered around, and took a seat with her arms crossed in a way that dared anyone to comment. It was a relief that no-one did.

Elayne was asking the Shienarans how fast they thought they'd be able to move once they were off the roads. That was her plan, to avoid the Shadow's eyes by travelling to Salidar through woods and farmland and over half forgotten tracks. Jurador was to be the last real town on their journey. Nynaeve gave one word answers to any questions directed her way, but otherwise stayed out of it, which made the girl's big blue eyes go even bigger.

Birgitte's eventual return drew many a glance from the men in the inn, and no few women besides. She noticed them, too, and was not at all bothered. She stood even straighter than usual and had tossed back her braid to remove even its minimal covering. Nynaeve fingered the knot of her shawl at her waist, wishing every glance at Birgitte did not remind her how much she herself was showing. Birgitte flaunted herself in those dresses without the hint of a blush. The woman was certainly nothing like any of the stories about her! But if Birgitte was all self-possessed coolness, Elayne very nearly quivered with emotion.

"Finally! Are the two of you planning to help at all? With Emara still bed-ridden with grief, we need all the help we can get. If you would care to stop acting the fools, that would be welcome."

That word—fool—popped up often enough lately to make Nynaeve keep a tight leash on her temper. She might doubt whether she could slap Birgitte, but Elayne had no such protection, Daughter-Heir or not. A few more repetitions, and the girl would discover that. Birgitte was more interested in the Shienarans than Elayne's complaints. It seemed she had encountered Borderlanders in previous lives, though their nations had had different names, and thought well of them by and large. True to what she'd said earlier, she spent far more time in their company than she did with the other women. The supposed Warder rolled her eyes at Elayne's tirade, and sauntered right over to another table, where Rikimaru and Juilin were having an early drink.

That tightened Elayne's lips, but the girl stayed focused on her task. "How far away from town do you think we could get in the hours of light that remain?"

Ragan rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "A fair bit, but we'd still be in Jurador if you take it to be a nation of its own, the way there Altarans do. The farmers we'd meet would be doing their business here."

"And carrying tales of us back with them," Elayne said.

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. It's a gamble."

She raised her chin in that annoying way of hers. "I do not like gambling. It is a foolish risk." She looked at Nynaeve. "Speaking of foolish risks, why did you see fit to wander all over town? Have you forgotten you are being hunted?"

"I know," Nynaeve managed to get out.

Elayne looked at her suspiciously. "You know?"

"I know I risked everything. I should have talked with you, asked you. I know I've been a fool. I should not be allowed outside without a keeper." It all came in a breathless rush.

Suspicion became concern. "Are you alright?"

"No. Yes. I'm ... what I deserve."

Elayne stared at her for a long moment, the lists of provisions forgotten on the table in front of her. She touched the dark braid her curly hair had been tamed into, then glanced at the others present and visibly changed her mind. She threw the braid over her shoulder, then tossed her head again, superciliously, for good measure. "I do hope Rand is alright. No-one has ever taught him he mustn't overextend himself. Doesn't he know the Power can kill him if he draws too much, or weaves when tired? That much is the same for him as for us."

So she meant to change the subject, did she? “Perhaps he doesn’t know,” Nynaeve told her sweetly, “since there isn’t a White Tower for men.” That made her think of something else. “Do you think it really was Sammael?”

Caught with a retort on the tip of her tongue, Elayne glowered at her sideways, then heaved a peevish sigh. “It hardly matters to us, does it? What we should be thinking about is using the ring again. There is so much to learn. The more I do learn, the more I know how much I don’t know yet.”

“No.” Nynaeve said, firmly this time. “No more trips to *Tel’aran’rhiod*, for either of us, except to meet the others.”

Elayne went right on without appearing to notice. Nynaeve could have been talking to herself. “It isn’t as though we need to channel. We won’t give ourselves away that way.” She did not look at Nynaeve, but there was a hint of bite in her voice. She maintained that they could use the Power, if they were careful. For all Nynaeve knew, Elayne did just that behind her back. “I’ll wager if one of us visited the Heart of the Stone tonight, Dani would be there. She could explain how Amys spoke to us like that. Think, if we could talk to Dani in her dreams, we’d not need to worry about encountering Moghedien in *Tel’aran’rhiod* any longer.”

“You think it’s easy to learn, then?” Nynaeve asked dryly. “If that’s so, why hasn’t she taught us already? Why hasn’t she done it before this?” Her heart was not in it, though. She was the one worried about Moghedien. Elayne knew the woman was dangerous, but it was like knowing a viper was dangerous; Elayne knew, but Nynaeve had been bitten. And being able to communicate without entering the World of Dreams would be valuable quite aside from avoiding Moghedien.

In any case, Elayne still was paying no attention to her. “I wonder why Lanfear attacked Dani.” For a moment she worried her underlip with her teeth.

Nynaeve could easily think of one reason. She could only hope their Domani friend had more sense than a certain red-haired Theren oaf. A much greater concern came to her then, and she took a deep breath, pressing both hands hard against her stomach in a vain effort to quiet sudden flutters. She managed to keep her voice flat, though. “Do you think Moghedien can do what Amys did? Find us, even in our dreams?”

“Light, you do have cheerful thoughts! No. If Moghedien could come into our dreams, I think we would know it by now.” Elayne gave a small shiver; she did have some idea of how dangerous Moghedien was.

Putting the *ter’angreal* that let them access *Tel’aran’rhiod* away, out of sight, except for meetings with Dani, had been a good idea. It had. Any venture into the World of Dreams could have found Moghedien, and keeping clear of her was better than a good idea. She already knew she was overmatched. That thought rankled, worse every time she had it, but it was the simple truth.

And it might be that Rand had one of the Forsaken after him in the same personal way that Moghedien was after her and Elayne. What Dani reported, both of Cairhien and of the mountains, smacked of one man daring another to knock a chip off his shoulder. Not that she could see anything to do about that. It was best for all of them if they just avoided dreaming for a while. And avoided the roads as well.

“When do we leave?”

Elayne pursed her lips judiciously. “Tomorrow morning, I think. We shall not cover enough ground for it to be worth leaving right away.”

Nynaeve would have liked to leave sooner, but she just sighed and bowed her head. Which won her even more of those strange stares.

CHAPTER 4: Good Girls Being Bad



Nynaeve left early; oddly early in Elayne's opinion. The woman was behaving very strangely of late. Leaving Keestis and the rest to their talk, she climbed the stairs alone and went to Nynaeve's room, intent on discovering what was wrong with her.

She would not usually have been so impolite as to enter without knocking, but did it that night. The acid remark she'd been expecting, and almost looking forward to, Light help her, did not come. Nynaeve just sat on the bedside looking morose. She looked younger than she was already, and had big brown eyes, but was usually so abrupt and demanding that you never noticed how cute she was. Elayne noticed it now.

"What is wrong with you?" she asked as she eased the door closed.

The explosion that really should have sparked never came. Nynaeve sighed and sulked at the floor instead. "I know. You don't have to point it out."

"Honestly, Nynaeve. This funk ill becomes you. Is it over our recent losses? They all knew the risks when they took up the cause of the Light against the Shadow, and rightly chose to fight anyway."

Her brow only furrowed more. "They chose to follow me. To help me. And look what it got them? It's my fault."

"Are you going to step aside, then? Let someone else lead?" It would have been a relief in some ways. Being led by Nynaeve was rather like being dragged along by a rampaging bull at times. Yet Elayne would not welcome the change even so. They had accomplished a great deal together, despite the setbacks they had suffered along the way.

A hand crept towards an oddly brassy braid, but stopped short of tugging. Nynaeve's jaw set. "It would be for the best."

"Hmm. I see. Well, I am sure you will be a most agreeable follower from here on. Do not worry that I shall send you to fetch my slippers, I am quite accustomed to living without servants."

Was she grinding her teeth? Nynaeve had played the servant for her before, with a spectacular lack of grace. But all she said was: "At least no-one would get hurt by slippers."

Elayne went and sat beside her on the bed, draping an arm across her shoulders. What could she say? Reason and provocation had failed. "Come now, Nynaeve. We both know you are no servant."

"I'm not a lot of things," she sighed.

"Shall I do it for you?" She took Nynaeve's hair in hand and gave it a gentle tug, smiling. "Come on. Give it a yank. You know you want to." But Nynaeve just sat there, head bobbing compliantly each time Elayne pulled on her hair. It was getting rather alarming.

In more ways than one. She wondered how far the other woman would let her push this. She set Nynaeve's head upon her shoulder, to offer what comfort she could while her imagination tried to escapes its proper bounds. "You're a good woman, whatever you think."

"They must have lower standards for good outside the Theren," she grouched.

Even at her lowest, her claws were still sharp. Elayne suppressed a sigh. "A good girl indeed. Looking after us all."

"Failing to."

"Fighting our enemies."

"Too much fighting. Too much killing."

"Fetching our slippers."

"I ... guess I deserve it."

"Hmm. A good, obedient girl, then. It suits you."

"If you say so," Nynaeve muttered, with a welcome hint of scowl.

Her smile turning to a smirk, Elayne decided to see how much it would take to tease out the rest. Holding her by the hair, she gently brought Nynaeve's face up to hers. "I can think of many a use for a good, obedient girl like you," she said, before kissing her softly. "Especially one with such fine lips."

There was a rising flush on Nynaeve's face, an alarm in her wide eyes. Yet she sat in silence as Elayne leaned back against the wall and tugged up her skirt. And the resistance did not emerge when a tug of her hair brought her closer, and a hand atop her head pushed those fine lips down to where Elayne wanted them most.

"Go on," she teased. "Show me what a good girl you are."

Though she sulked, Nynaeve busied herself removing Elayne's underwear. The lack of pushback remained alarming, but the prospect of what was coming threatened to push it out of Elayne's mind. She fought against it. An obedient, disheartened Nynaeve was not something she wanted. There had to be a way to bring her back to herself. How far would she let herself be pushed before she started pushing back?

But perhaps there was no need to rush. Her heart was already racing as she watched Nynaeve's face slip in between her thighs, and it only got faster when she felt something warm and wet touch something warmer and wetter. *Fine indeed*, she did not say, being too busy moaning.

Those lips and that lapping tongue sent little thrills of pleasure thought her. "A little higher," she urged. "Just ... just ... there—Oh!" She petted Nynaeve's hair. "Good girl. That's my pet." Was that a glare? It was not an entirely displeasing prospect, but perhaps if she could hold off just a little longer.

Nynaeve worked her well, face down and hips in the air, wagging unconsciously. She did have nice hips and ... Oh, she really shouldn't. But ... Elayne bit her bottom lip hard. Holding herself as still as she could, not wanting to interrupt the ministrations, she began struggling out of her dress. She couldn't get rid of all of it, but she manage enough that all she had to do was sit up on her knees and push the dress down over her hips when she finally tapped Nynaeve on the head and got her to stop licking.

She found herself kneeling naked on the bed, in front of a fully dressed woman. That wouldn't do. "Well? Strip for your mistress," she commanded.

"You can't just—" Nostrils stayed flared only for a moment, and Nynaeve ducked her eyes. She undressed slowly but not provocatively. Elayne was torn between enjoying the sight and wondering what it would take to get her to stop this foolishness.

Nynaeve stripped to her stockings, displaying her slender waist, her dark bush, and a round pair of breasts between which hung a heavy golden ring, sized for a man. It was the ring she moved to hide, not her nudity.

"Leave it on." Perhaps it would help bring her to her senses. "He entrusted it to you, after all. You should wear it, while you are kneeling like the good, penitent girl you are." That brought a flush to her whole face, but when Elayne clicked her fingers and pointed, she still went to her elbows and knees upon the bed.

Kneeling beside her, she let her hands roam over her prize, caressing the long curve of her back and her flaring hips, giving her soft bottom a little squeeze. Taking hold of Nynaeve's hair again, she embraced *saidar* long enough to weave and tie off a construct of air, like a small rod, two fingers thick and the length of her hand. It was misty enough to be almost transparent, but remained solid after she released the Source. It was cold, too, but she suspected Nynaeve would be able to help with that.

"What was that you were weaving?"

Elayne smiled. "Oh, you'll know soon enough. I am reminded of one of Lini's old sayings. Spare the rod, spoil the child." Tightening her grip on Nynaeve's hair, she located her hot hole and slipped the cold rod inside. There was a loud gasp, but no pulling away, so further in it went, until Elayne had only a small fraction left to grip.

"No objections, then?" She slid it out a little, and back in again. "Is this what you want? What you deserve?" There was no answer save her low moans, as Elayne slowly fucked her with the rod. "Will you atone like this with the other girls, too? Kneel before Birgitte any time she feels aroused. Let Keestis have her way with you. Will I have to watch you cry while Emara slaps you silly, or hear you beg Shimoku to give you a spanking? I must say, I do not enjoy the thought. Do you?"

A low growl sounded, oddly welcome to Elayne's ears. She slipped the now warm rod out, and pointed it at Nynaeve's other hole. "Will you let them play with this as well?" she asked, as she ran the rod around the sensitive circle.

"No," she muttered.

Elayne smiled. "No? Why how very dare you say no to your mistress? A properly apologetic girl would be willing to atone in any way. You had better not dare to stop me."

"I ..."

She went slow, expecting Nynaeve to stop her at any moment, and was a little disappointed when she did not. It took a little more force than expected to push the rod into Nynaeve's bottom, but in it went, causing an even louder gasp than before. Light. This wasn't working. Maybe Nynaeve was just too horny to think straight. Perhaps if she brought her to climax first ... So Elayne set about doing just that, moving the rod in and out of Nynaeve's butt while she reached between her thighs to give her soft sex a quite vigorous rubbing. The dual assault soon had her dripping and whimpering but Elayne did not let up, not until that drip became a flood and those whimpers became a cry of relief.

By that time, her arms were a little sorer than she would have cared to admit. But there was still work to do. She waited only until Nynaeve's breathing had returned to an almost decent cadence before speaking. "I must admit to being surprised. I would not have expected you to be so easily broken. But Moghedien really did break you, didn't she? She has turned you into quite the timid lamb. A whimpering toady. Quite the victory for her. I'm sure she will be delighted to see you fetching and carrying."

"I am not ... those things." It was most definitely a growl that time.

"Oh please," Elayne said, in her most aristocratic of voices. "There are men in Far Madding with more spine. You are fit only to be the group's whipping girl." The rod was lodged in Nynaeve's tight nethers, leaving her hand free to crack across one pale buttock. There was more than a little outrage in the hiss that caused, but Elayne drawled on. "A servant, attending to everyone's laundry." Smack. "Cleaning their dishes." Smack. "Seeing their every desire satisfied." Smack. "It's a pretty bottom. I suspect it will be very red in the days to come."

She swung again, but her latest smack struck only air. There was a feral gleam in the eyes of the woman who turned on her. It was such a welcome sight that Elayne couldn't find any room for alarm at first. Though she did find a little, when Nynaeve pounced on her and bore her down onto the bed.

"You snooty little chit! I'll show you," she said, reaching back for something.

Elayne knew what it was. And she was, admittedly, very ready. It went in easy, as Nynaeve lay atop her. She didn't even try to hide how good it felt. Her legs went around the other woman, spreading herself, offering herself. Though she was rough at first, gripping Elayne's curls tightly and shoving that rod in and out fast, the anger soon faded from Nynaeve's face. It had shifted to tenderness by the time it descended to hers, mouth to mouth. The movement of the rod slowed, too, but after all that had happened it was still not very long before Elayne felt an orgasm building within her.

She was dimly aware of arms holding her tight as she thrashed in her pleasure. When she at last came back to herself, she found a cheek resting against her breast, gentle fingers idly toying with one stiff nipple. She hugged the cheek's owner.

"You are too hard on yourself."

"You could have just said that," Nynaeve muttered.

"I rather thought I did," Elayne said primly.

She sniffed.

Elayne sighed. "Honestly, though. You can't take every setback or injury or even casualty to heart. No war has ever been won without casualties. We march on, as we must, in the name of those who fell along the way."

"I can take to heart whatever I want," Nynaeve said stubbornly.

Elayne sighed louder. It was rather disturbing, how much she reminded her of Rand in that moment. "I could get used to spanking you, I suppose. It is, as I said, a pretty bottom."

"You will not! And thank you. But you will NOT!"

She sighed yet again. It seemed it had become her lot in life.

CHAPTER 5: *To Salidar*



Theirs was not a small group. Five Accepted, four Shienaran soldiers and a watchful thiefcatcher. Someone who didn't know any better might have taken them for Aes Sedai and Warders. Perhaps that would explain the watchful eyes when they'd left town. Or perhaps Nynaeve had only been imagining it. Perhaps. She was glad when they left the road and cut across country, though, even if the sullen heat made her miss the carriage a little.

She hadn't said anything to the others about her suspicions. She'd been too focused on sitting straight in her saddle, keeping her chin high, trying to show that she was not the things that Elayne had accused her of yesterday. Obnoxious girl. No bedside manner at all. The next time she was under the weather, Nynaeve would be sure to mix a little something extra into her potion. That had always kept the people of Emond's Field on their best behaviour. She suddenly missed it. A girl raised in a palace like Elayne might think a forest was just a forest, but Nynaeve could never have mistaken the one they rode through now for the forests of home, not even in this fading light. How were they all? Safe and healthy, if they knew what was good for them. A lot had happened while she was gone, and a lot had changed, too, if Rand could be believed. She wished she could find the time for a visit, to make sure all was well.

Sometimes it seemed to Nynaeve that she had forgotten why she had left the Theren in the first place. To protect young people from her village who had been caught in Aes Sedai webs. Not that much younger than herself—only a few years—yet the gap seemed wider when you were the village Wisdom. Of course, the Women's Circle in Emond's Field had certainly chosen a new Wisdom by now, but that did not make it less her village, or them less her people. In her heart of hearts, it made her no less the Wisdom. Somehow, though, protecting Rand and Anna and Mat and Perrin from Aes Sedai had become helping them survive, and finally, without her quite realizing when or how, even that goal had been submerged in other needs. Entering the White Tower to learn how better to pull down Moiraine had become a burning desire to learn how to Heal. Even her hatred for Aes Sedai meddling in people's lives now coexisted with her desire to become one. Not that she really wanted to, but it was the only way to learn what she wanted to learn. Everything had become as tangled as one of those Aes Sedai webs, herself included, and she did not know how to escape.

I am still who I always have been, I will help them, as much as I can. "Riding through a forest at night is a good way to break your neck," she announced. "Fine for you, but you could at least spare the poor horses."

Birgitte, riding at the front of the party, sighed dramatically. "If ever you needed an example of someone trying to teach their grandmother to knit ..."

Rikimaru laughed softly, then pretended not to notice Nynaeve glaring at his back. Her glare didn't last long, however. If not for him, Shimoku would have joined Ronelle and Katsui at the bottom of the river, put there by Nynaeve's foolishness.

Birgitte sighed again. "But riding on just to make a point would be even worse. We've put enough distance between us and the roads."

"And civilisation," Elayne muttered, tugging at her travel stained dress.

As was proper, the men attended to the simple tasks of setting up camp, leaving the women to discuss weightier issues such as what to do in the future while they waited for the tents to be put up. Well, most of the women anyway. Areku was a bad example to begin with, and it didn't look like Birgitte was going to be setting her straight from the way she was starting that fire.

There weren't enough tents for everyone, so the women would be sharing two between them. Nynaeve supposed it made sense that she be in with Elayne and Birgitte, but she did not relish the thought. Shimoku was a pleasant girl, and Keestis only occasionally let the sharper side of her tongue show. Emara would be there, though. Who would be harder to face? Her or Birgitte?

Within their tent, she shed her clothes in lamp lit silence, wishing she could shed her guilt as easily. Nynaeve changed into a decent dress, with a few exasperated mutters for having to undo one

set of buttons and do up another by herself. The plain grey wool, fine and well cut yet hardly elaborate, would pass without comment almost anywhere, but it was decidedly warmer. Still, it felt good to be decently garbed again. And somehow odd, as if she were wearing too many clothes. It must be the heat.

Lan's heavy signet ring and her gold Great Serpent remained nestled in her belt pouch despite the isolation. The small gilded coffer containing the gems Amathera had given her was in a leather srip with the pouches of herbs taken from Ronde Macura and the small mortar and pestle for preparing them; she fingered through the latter just to remind herself what each contained, from healall to that dreadful forkroot. The letters-of-rights were there as well, and three of the six purses, none quite as fat as it had been when they left Tear. The letter authorizing the bearer to do whatever she wished in the name of the Amyrlin Seat she kept with the rings. No more than vague rumours of some sort of trouble in Tar Valon had reached this far south yet; she might find a use for it, even with Sivan Sanche's signature. The dark wooden box with their *ter'angreal* was in Elayne's saddlebags, with the silver arrow they had found the night of the calamitous encounter with Moghedien.

For a moment she frowned, contemplating Moghedien. It *was* best to do whatever was necessary to avoid her. It was. *I bested her once!* And had been hung up like a sausage in the kitchen the second time. If not for Birgitte ... *She made her own choice.* The woman had said so, and it was true. *I could defeat her again. I could. But if I failed ...* If she failed ...

She was only trying to avoid the washleather purse stuffed down at the bottom of the srip, and she knew it, yet there was not a hair's difference for ugliness between the purse and the thought of losing to Moghedien again. Drawing a deep breath, she gingerly reached in and took it up by the drawstrings, and knew she had been wrong. Evil seemed to bathe her hand, stronger than ever, as if the Dark One really was trying to break through the *cuendillar* seal inside. Better to dwell all day on defeat by Moghedien; there was a *world* of difference between thought and reality. It had to be imagination—there had been no such feeling in Tanchico—but she wished she could let Elayne carry that, too. Or leave it in this forest.

Stop being foolish, she told herself firmly. *It holds the Dark One's prison shut. You are just letting your fancies run wild.* But she still dropped it like a week-dead rat onto the dirty dress, then wrapped and tied the thing securely with more than a little haste. A few inches' distance was enough to take away the sensation of dark bleakness, but she still wanted to wash her hand. If only she did not know it was there. She was being foolish. Elayne would laugh at her, and Birgitte, as well. And rightly.

It was just her luck that the two of them chose that moment to enter the tent, forcing her to jump embarrassingly. It was plain that they had noticed, too. *I am so tired of being a coward.*

"Tonight," she said aloud, "I will use the ring." Sitting down on the bedroll, she began to pull on her spare stockings. Stout wool was hardly comfortable in this heat, but at least part of her would be decently clothed. Stout stockings, and stout shoes. Elayne wore brocaded underwear, and gossamer silk stockings that surely looked cool. She put the thought firmly out of her head. "Just to see if Dani is in the Stone. If she isn't, I will come back, and we won't use the ring again until the next scheduled meeting."

Elayne watched her, with an unblinking stare that made her tug at her stockings in increasing discomfort. The woman did not say a word, but her expressionless gaze implied that Nynaeve might be lying. To Nynaeve it did. It did not help that the thought had fluttered on the edge of consciousness that she could easily make sure the ring was not touching her skin when she went to sleep; there was no real reason to believe that Dani would be waiting in the Heart of the Stone tonight. She had never really considered it—the thought had drifted up unbidden—but it had been there, and made it hard to meet Elayne's eyes. What if she was afraid of Moghedien? It was only good sense, however it galled to admit it.

I will do what I must. She clamped down firmly on butterflies in the pit of her belly. By the time she tossed the shift down over her stockings, she was eager to don the blue dress and go out into the night just to escape Elayne's eyes.

Supper proved at odd affair. Nynaeve very pointedly refused to help, to make sure that none of them thought her some kind of servant or pet. Elayne very pointedly *did* help, while giving Nynaeve the occasional look that reminded her somehow of Mistress Barran, though the two women could not have looked more different.

She was not about to be put off, however, not after boasting that she would go. And especially not when Elayne went and told Birgitte what she intended, later that night.

The archer shook her fakely dark head. "Foolish enough when fifteen year old boys do it. Passing strange to see it in a grown woman."

Nynaeve flushed, scowling at the ring in her hands. The way it twisted in on itself looked sinister somehow but she stubbornly pulled the cord over her head anyway.

"Women face hardships head on. Little girls run and hide under the bed," she said.

"This from the one who never misses an opportunity to insult the men," Birgitte said.

Elayne looked as if she might agree, but what she said was, "It is for the best."

Such talk didn't make her look any less worried as she sat and watched Nynaeve trying to fall asleep. And being watched certainly didn't make the falling asleep part any easier. Birgitte didn't have respond so sharply to her gentle rebuke over that. Nynaeve was barely able to stop herself from giving a less gentle rebuke. Closing her eyes hid the woman's accusing stare, but it was still an uncomfortably long wait before she dozed off.

Nynaeve found herself back in the Heart of the Stone, and wandered aimlessly for a moment before awareness returned and drove the haze of sleep from her mind. That was sinister as well, it now occurred. Being asleep in body but not in mind. A cold fear trickled down her back. There were hidden eyes on her. *Tel'aran'rhiod* almost always felt like that, but now she knew that any one of those eyes could belong to Moghedien.

"Dani!" she called. Croaked really. She cleared her throat and tried again. "Dani!" The last hoarse call echoed among the columns, and Nynaeve made herself stand there shivering for a count of one hundred. The great chamber remained empty except for her. Dani must have meant what she'd said. Wishing she could feel more regret than haste, she stepped out of the dream ...

... and lay fingering the stone ring on its thong, staring at the canvas roof of their tent and listening to the thousand sounds of a woodland night.

"Was she there?" Elayne demanded. "You were not gone very long, but—"

"I am tired of being afraid," Nynaeve said without taking her gaze from the roof. "I am s-s-o tired of being a c-coward." The last words dissolved into tears she could neither stop nor hide, no matter how she scrubbed at her eyes.

Elayne was there in an instant, holding her and smoothing her hair, and an instant later, Birgitte pressed a cloth dampened in cool water against the back of her neck. She cried herself out to the sound of them telling her she was not a coward.

"If I thought Moghedien was hunting me," Birgitte said finally, "I would run. If there was no other place to hide than a badger's hole, I would wriggle in and curl into a ball and sweat until she was gone. I would not stand in front of a bull if it charged either; and neither is cowardice. You must choose your own time and your own ground, and come at her in the way she least expects. I will take my revenge on her if ever I can, but that is the only way I will. Anything else would be foolish."

That was hardly what Nynaeve wanted to hear, but her tears and their comfort made another gap in the thorny hedges that had grown up between them.

"I will prove to you that you are no coward." Taking the dark wooden box from her saddlebag, Elayne removed the spiral-scribed iron disc. "We will go back together."

That, Nynaeve wanted to hear even less. But there was no way to avoid it, not after they had told her she was not a coward. So back they went.

To the Stone of Tear, where they stared at *Callandor*—better than looking over your shoulder and wondering whether Moghedien was going to appear—then to the Royal Palace in Caemlyn with Elayne leading, and Emond's Field under Nynaeve's guidance. Nynaeve had seen palaces before with their huge halls and great painted ceilings and marble floors, their gilding and fine carpets and elaborate hangings, but this was where Elayne had grown up. Seeing it, and knowing that, made her understand a little of Elayne. Of course the woman expected the world to bend itself to her; she had grown up being taught that it would, in a place where it did.

Elayne was strangely quiet while they were there. But then, Nynaeve was quiet in Emond's Field. For one thing, the village was larger than she remembered, with more thatch-roofed houses and others' wooden frameworks going up. Someone was building a very big house just outside the village, three sprawling stories, and a stone plinth fifteen feet high had been erected on the Green, carved all over with names. A good many she recognized; they were mostly Theren names. A flagpole stood to

either side of the plinth, one topped by a banner with a red wolf's head, the other one with a red eagle. Everything looked prosperous and happy—as much as she could say, with no people there—but it made no sense. What on earth were those banners? And who would be building such a house?

They flashed to the White Tower, to Elaida's study. Nothing had changed there, except that only half a dozen stools remained in the semicircle in front of Elaida's table. And the triptych of Bonwhin was gone. The painting of Rand remained, with a poorly mended tear in the canvas across Rand's face, as if someone had thrown something at it.

They rifled the papers in the lacquered box with its golden hawks, and those on the Keeper's table in the anteroom. Documents and letters changed while they looked at them, yet they did learn a little. Elaida knew that Rand had crossed the Dragonwall into Cairhien, but of what she intended to do about it, there was no clue. An angry demand that all Aes Sedai return to the Tower immediately unless they had specific orders otherwise from her. Elaida seemed to be angry about a good deal, that so few sisters had returned after her offer of amnesty, that most of the eyes-and-ears in Tarabon were still silent, that Pedron Niall was still calling Whitecloaks back to Amadicia when she did not know why, that Davram Bashere still could not be found despite having an army with him. Fury filled every document over her seal. None of it seemed of real use or interest, except maybe about the Whitecloaks. They had little respect for any nation's borders, and less for Altara's. Amadicia was far too close for comfort.

Elayne agreed wholeheartedly. "They would try to kill us the moment they learned we could channel. That is the law in Amadicia, and Whitecloak law, too. Aes Sedai are outlawed there, and so is any woman who has ever trained in the Tower. Mother met the Queen of Amadicia once to sign a trade treaty, and they had to do it in Altara because Mother could not legally enter Amadicia."

"Ridiculous place. I'm surprised anyone chooses to live there."

"You would be surprised how many do. Amadicia is a favoured destination for those who abandon their homelands. Almost as favoured as Tanchico, though mostly by men."

Nynaeve sniffed to show what she thought of that. Elayne just nodded agreement. "You certainly would not have liked it there. Even before you began channelling. A woman has to be careful, dealing in remedies in Amadicia. Should she cure too many, or too well, somebody might whisper of Aes Sedai, and her neighbours might burn her house down. Or worse. Not many women follow your old craft there. It is much too dangerous."

She reached for another message, but the paper faded from her hands before she could read a word. Ridiculous place indeed. Almost as much so as this one. "And who do they go to when they're ill? A hedge-doctor?"

"Yes," Elayne said. "In Amadicia, it is men who study herbs."

Nynaeve frowned scornfully. "What could a man ever know about curing anything? I'd as soon ask a farrier to make a dress." It really would be nice to get back to Emond's Field—where things made sense.

When they returned to their bodies in the tent, Elayne was silent as she rose from the bedding and replaced the disc in the box. Without thinking, Nynaeve got up to help her out of her dress. Birgitte took the bedroll nearest the entry, while Elayne and Nynaeve got under the blankets together in their shifts; just for warmth. There could be nothing more while Birgitte was there.

Elayne channelled to extinguish the lamp. After a time lying in the dark, she said, "The palace seemed so ... empty, Nynaeve. It felt so empty."

Nynaeve did not know what else a place was supposed to be in *Tel'aran'rhiad*. "Perhaps it was the *ter'angreal* you used. The ring works much better."

"I think I know why. Why the ring works better, I mean."

"Because you don't have to channel, obviously."

"That also," Elayne said with a touch of acerbity. "I have been examining them. Carefully, of course. I want to try."

"Try what?"

"Making one. Copying it, actually. The Seanchan said I could make a *'dam* for them. I don't see how this would be any different."

Growing up in a palace did terrible things to a girl's mind. But a good healer could not let pity cloud their judgement. "Save your dreaming for after you fall asleep, girl."

Scandalized gasps did not move her, nor did her sensible—and gentle!—rebukes make Elayne see sense. It was only when Birgitte snapped that they had a long journey ahead of them tomorrow that Elayne allowed silence to return to the tent.

Nynaeve had remembered the other woman's elbows as accurately as her temper, but none of that could diminish her good mood, and neither could Elayne's complaining murmur that she had cold feet. She had done it. Perhaps forgetting to be afraid was not the same as not being afraid, but at least she had gone back to the World of Dreams. Perhaps one day she could find the nerve again not to be afraid.

Having begun, it was easier to go on than to stop. Every night after that they entered *Tel'aran'rhiod* together, always with a visit to the Tower to see what they could learn. There was not very much, besides an order sending an emissary to Salidar to invite the Aes Sedai there to return to the Tower. Except, the invitation—as much as Nynaeve could read before it changed to a report on screening potential Novices for proper attitudes, whatever that was supposed to mean—was more a demand that those Aes Sedai submit to Elaida immediately and be thankful they were allowed to. Still, it was confirmation that they were not chasing a wild hare. The trouble with the rest of what they saw in fragments was they did not know enough to fit them together. Who was this Davram Bashere, and why was Elaida so frantic to find him? Why had Elaida forbidden anyone to mention the name of Mazrim Taim, the false Dragon, with a threat of stiff penalties? Why had Queen Tenobia of Saldaea and Queen Kensin of Shienar both written letters politely but stiffly resenting White Tower meddling in their affairs? It all made Elayne murmur one of Lini's sayings: “ ‘To know two, you must first know one.’ ” Nynaeve could only agree that it certainly seemed so.

Of Amys' trick of speaking in their dreams, they could puzzle out nothing; calling her did nothing except increase that uneasy feeling of being watched, and she did not make another such appearance. Trying to hold somebody else in *Tel'aran'rhiod* was incredibly frustrating, even after Elayne hit on the trick, which was to see the other as just another part of the dream. Elayne did it finally—and Nynaeve congratulated her with as good grace as she could muster—but for days Nynaeve could not. Elayne might as well have been the near mist she seemed, vanishing with a smile whenever she chose. When Nynaeve finally managed to fasten Elayne there she felt the strain as if she were picking up a boulder.

Creating fantastical flowers or shapes by thinking of them was much more fun. The effort involved seemed related to both how large the thing was and whether it might really exist. Trees covered with wildly shaped blossoms in red and gold and purple were harder to make than a stand-mirror to examine what you had done to your dress, or what the other woman had done to it. A gleaming crystal palace rising out of the ground was harder still, and even if it felt solid to the touch, it changed whenever the image in your mind wavered and vanished as soon as the image did. They quietly decided to leave animals alone after a peculiar thing—much like a horse with a horn on its nose!—chased them both up a hill before they could make it vanish. That very nearly sparked a new argument, with each of them claiming the other had made it, but by that time Elayne had recovered enough of her old self to start giggling over how they must have looked, racing up the hill with their skirts hauled up, shouting at the thing to go away. Even Elayne's stubborn refusal to admit it had been her fault could not stop Nynaeve's giggles from bubbling up, too.

They alternated between the iron disc and the twisted ring *ter'angreal*, but both women liked the ring best. Somehow you felt more fully in *Tel'aran'rhiod* when using it. Aside from that, the iron disk was awkward to use; it was not possible to tie the flow of Spirit, or you bounced right back out of the World of Dreams immediately. Channelling anything else at the same time seemed all but impossible, yet Elayne could not explain why. She seemed more interested in how they had been made, and not at all pleased that they did not yield their secrets easily. Not knowing the “why” was a burr in her stocking.

The extra concentration required to channel and dreamwalk at the same time might explain why it felt less satisfactory to use the iron disk. Nynaeve wasn't always able to manage it, when it was her turn. On one such occasion, she woke from the World of Dreams mid conversation and was not able to get back in before Elayne rejoined her in the real world. That was embarrassing, but Elayne's ire was directed at the *ter'angreal* rather than her. Nynaeve took advantage of the moment to cool her face with water.

When she turned from the washbowl, Elayne was just sitting up, untying the leather cord that held the ring. “I saw you losing *saidar*, so I went by Elaida’s study, but I didn’t think I should stay long in case you worried. I didn’t learn anything, except that Shemerin is to be arrested and reduced to Accepted.” She got up and tucked the ring into the box.

“They can do that? Demote an Aes Sedai?”

“I don’t know. I think Elaida is doing anything she wants. I don’t think Dani and Rand are going to come.”

Nynaeve sniffed. “The Wise Ones have them wrapped around their fingers.” She would have expected a Theren man to be made of sterner stuff.

“I did not even have a chance to send a message to Rand.” Elayne got under the blankets, and the lamp winked out. “And one to Aviendha. If she is taking care of him for me, then she ought to take care of him.”

“He isn’t a horse, Elayne. You don’t own him.”

“I never said I did. How will you feel if Lan takes up with some Cairhienin woman?”

“Don’t be silly. Go to sleep.” Nynaeve burrowed fiercely into her small pillow. Perhaps she should have sent word to Lan. All those noblewomen, Tairen as well as Cairhienin. Feeding a man honey instead of telling him the truth. He had better not forget who he belonged to. She didn’t think he would, though. Lan was a proper man. Rand was a lost cause in that regard. Nynaeve was certainly not going to be the one to explain to her what had been happening between Rand and a certain Cairhienin woman—Elayne’s own aunt. No. That was a drama Nynaeve would stay well out of. Sleeping with both aunt and niece. Men had no standards at all.

Elayne, too, remained persistent in her studies. The dream *ter’angreal* were in her hands as often during the day as at night. Her habit of riding with a *ter’angreal* in hand, and randomly embracing *saidar*, set the other Accepted on edge. Elayne barely noticed, so Nynaeve was forced to confront her on it one day.

“Why under the Light do you want to look at that?” she asked. “If you can’t stop thinking about it, at least have the decency to hide it in public.”

“Don’t sound so prim,” Elayne told her. A slow smile broke across her face, a flush of excitement. “I think I could make one.”

“Make one!” Nynaeve lowered her voice, but she did not soften it any. “Light, you are serious. And mad. No-one has made a *ter’angreal* since the Age of Legends.”

“No-one in the White Tower. The Seanchan have been making them for centuries.” Elayne held herself erect, chin tilted in that cool way of hers. She sounded offended, and icily calm. “But I have puzzled out how it works.”

“You think so, do you? All those Aes Sedai who studied *ter’angreal* in the Tower over the years probably thought the same. Do you remember the lectures on what happened to them? Dead. Burned out. Worse.” The studied the girl intently as they rode. “And you plan to try anyway, don’t you?” She did not even have the grace to blush. “I’m starting to think that Lini you like to complain about was too soft on you. There are—”

“Don’t you understand?” Elayne broke in, haughtiness all gone in excitement and fervour. She edged her horse closer to put a hand on Nynaeve’s knee, and her eyes shone, she was so delighted with herself. “It is a *ter’angreal*, Nynaeve. And I think I can make one.” She said each word slowly and deliberately, then laughed and rushed on. “If I can make this one, I can make others. Maybe I can even make *angreal* and *sa’angreal*.” Straightening, she shivered, and laid fingers across her mouth. “I never really thought of making anything myself before. Not anything useful. I remember seeing a craftsman once, a man who had made some chairs for the palace. They were not gilded, or elaborately carved—they were meant for the servants’ hall—but I could see the pride in his eyes. Pride in what he had made, a thing well crafted. I would love to feel that, I think. Oh, if we only knew a fraction of what the Forsaken do. The knowledge of the Age of Legends inside their heads, and they use it to serve the Shadow. Think what we could do with it. Think what we could make.” She took a deep breath, dropping her hands in her lap, her enthusiasm barely diminished. “Well, be that as it may, I’ll wager I could puzzle out how Whitebridge was made, too. Buildings like spun glass, but stronger than steel. And *cuendillar*, and—”

“Slow down,” Nynaeve said. “Whitebridge is five or six hundred miles from here at least, and if you think you’re going to go channelling at the seal, you can think again. Who knows what could happen? It stays in its pouch until we find somewhere safe for it.”

Elayne’s eagerness was very odd. Nynaeve would not have minded a little of the Forsaken’s knowledge herself—far from it—but if she wanted a chair, she paid a carpenter. She had never wanted to make anything, aside from poultices and salves. When she was twelve, her mother had stopped going through the motions of teaching her to sew, after it became apparent that she did not care whether she sewed a straight seam and could not be made to care. As for cooking ... She thought she was a good cook, actually, but the point was that she knew what was significant. Healing was important. Any man could build a bridge, and leave him to it was what she said.

She did what she could to dissuade Elayne, but the girl was stubborn as a mule sometimes. The *ter’angreal* still came out from time to time during their journey, and she still embraced *saidar* to channel at them, while pretended not to notice the alarmed way Keestis stared at her.

For Nynaeve’s part, it wasn’t just her ... sensible caution of *Tel’aran’rhiod* that waned as the journey to Salidar progressed. Birgitte’s rude rejection of all her apologies, and occasional outright mockery, wore away at her pity for the woman as well. Birgitte acted almost mannish herself at times. She spent at least as much time with the Shienarans as she did the other women, laughing at their no doubt crass jokes, chatting about the best fletching for arrows, or noting the tracks they passed. Nynaeve could have told her a thing or two about those last, if the woman wasn’t busy giving Mendoao the wrong idea.

Elayne wasn’t best pleased with her either. Supposedly, she was her Warder—a woman Warder, the first. But Birgitte didn’t act like any Warder Nynaeve had ever saw. She didn’t keep nearly as close an eye on Elayne as Lan did Moiraine, for one thing. It was enough to make Elayne, while watching her with the Shienarans, privately wonder at her loyalty. Until an occasion, in the early days of their journey, put paid to that.

They’d stopped early that day, Ragan having claimed he’d found a nice defensible camping spot between some boulders. It did look defensible, to be fair, but it turned out that wasn’t the only reason he’d wanted to stop, as they learned when Birgitte brought them the news as they were chatting with the other Accepted.

“Rikimaru and Mendoao are back from their scouting. They saw something,” was what she said.

“Back!” Nynaeve exclaimed, and Birgitte glanced at her before returning to Elayne. “You did not send them?”

“I did not,” Elayne said grimly.

She marched off, Birgitte at her heels, before Nynaeve could say a word. There was nothing for it but to follow, grumbling to herself. Elayne had better not suddenly think she was the one giving orders. Nynaeve had still not forgiven her for revealing so much to the men. This mutiny was her fault as much as Ragan’s. And after all Nynaeve had done to make sure the soldiers knew who was in charge. The dry heat did nothing for her mood, and the lack of shuffling feet Elayne’s accusations met with didn’t help either.

“I’m supposed to be keeping you safe, my lady,” Ragan told her stubbornly. “The Lord Dragon commanded it. You are being hunted. Peace! Why would we not try to hide your trail?”

“You should have asked first, armsman,” Elayne said in an icy voice.

The three men were veterans of many battles, but they all lowered their heads at her rebuke. “Forgive me, Lady Elayne. I did not think it necessary,” Ragan said, though he looked rather more annoyed than apologetic.

“B—bold Maerion tells me your man ‘saw something’. I trust it was not a squirrel?”

“Rikimaru.”

The soldier in question was handsome despite the scar that had almost taken one of his eyes. He was also nearly as hard to ruffle as Lan. He bowed smoothly before reporting. “Someone has been following us. And has managed to do so despite our efforts to hide our tracks. They crested a hill while we were working, and took off at a gallop as soon as they saw us.”

“Who?” Nynaeve demanded.

“They were far away, and silhouetted. A woman, by the length of her hair. I can tell you no more.”

She swallowed. How strange that the thought of being followed by a woman was actually more threatening than being stalked by a man, now. Moghedien? Liandrin? They hadn't seen so much as a farmstead in days. A lone woman just happening to be riding out here was very unlikely.

"So much for avoiding the roads," Elayne sighed.

Birgitte put a hand on her shoulder. "It was the right idea. And it can still work. We'll just have to take steps to throw this tracker off our trail." She sounded more like a woman encouraging a notoriously disappointing little sister than a Warder speaking to her Aes Sedai. Seeing exactly how well that sat with Elayne was enough to bring a smile to Nynaeve's face, despite her worry.

Steps were indeed taken in the days that followed, and Nynaeve made a point of helping with them. There was a time to remind a man who was in charge, and a time to remind him why. This was the latter. She was confident in her work, and pretty pleased with the surprise that it was met with—no-one ever seemed to expect her to know her way around the woods for some reason. Watchers left to look for sign of their pursuer returned each night to report no sightings, and the others relaxed, but Nynaeve could never quite manage to.

It was easy to forget who Birgitte was and what had happened between them while working on the trail. Birgitte's lack of concern over it all made it even easier. That and her general Birgittiness.

By the end of their journey, Nynaeve had had quite enough of that. Elayne was just finishing helping Nynaeve with the rows of small buttons up the back of her dress that morning—and muttering that no-one had helped her—when the tent flap was pushed aside, letting in a wave of air. Startled, Nynaeve jumped and covered her bosom with both hands before she could stop herself. When Birgitte ducked in instead of one of the men, she tried to pretend she was adjusting the neckline.

Smoothing brilliant blue fabric over her hip, the taller woman pulled her thick black braid over one bare shoulder with a self-pleased grin. "If you want to draw attention, don't bother fiddling. It is too obvious. Just breathe deeply." She demonstrated, then laughed at Nynaeve's scowl. What she wore gave a moment's pause, and not because of the way it pushed up her bosom. Her divided skirts could have been the voluminous trousers she had worn in *Tel'aran'rhiod*, except for being more gold than yellow and not being gathered at the ankles. The short blue coat was identical in cut, and had been deliberately left unbuttoned to facilitate the aforementioned pushing up. The woman had no shame.

Nynaeve made an effort to keep her temper. Though why she should, she did not know. She could hardly imagine that she had felt guilt over what had happened. Gaidal Cain was probably glad to get away from the woman. And Birgitte got to wear her hair the way she wanted. Not that that had anything to do with anything. "I knew someone like you in the Theren, Maerion. Calle knew every merchant's guard by his first name, and she certainly had no secrets from any of them."

Birgitte's smile tightened. "And I knew a woman like you, once. Mathena looked down her nose at men, too, and even had a poor fellow executed for coming on her by accident while she swam naked. She had never even been kissed, until Zheres stole one from her. You'd have thought she had discovered men for the first time. She became so besotted, Zheres had to go live on a mountain to escape her. Watch out for the first man to kiss you. One has to come along sooner or later."

Fists clenching, Nynaeve took a step toward her. Or tried to. Somehow Elayne was in between them, hands upraised.

"Both of you stop it this minute," she said, eyeing them in turn with equal haughtiness. "Lini always said 'Rough weather turns men into bears in a barn, and women into cats in a sack', but you will stop clawing at one another right now! I will not put up with it any longer!"

To Nynaeve's surprise, Birgitte actually blushed and mumbled a sullen apology. To Elayne, of course, but the apology itself was the surprise. Birgitte had chosen to stay close to Elayne—there was no need for her to hide—but the heat was apparently affecting her as badly as it did Elayne. For herself, Nynaeve gave the Daughter-Heir her frostiest stare. She had managed to maintain an even disposition—she had—but Elayne certainly had no room to talk.

"Now," Elayne said, still in that icy tone, "did you have some reason for barging in like a bull, or have you simply forgotten your manners?"

Nynaeve opened her mouth to say something about cats—just a gentle reminder—but Birgitte forestalled her, if in a tighter voice.

"We're nearly there," Birgitte said. "According to the map, we should reach Salidar today."

"A fine choice of dress, then. I look forward to it even more."

Birgitte smiled toothily. “It’s a pity, I’d say. You were almost starting to grow a spine. But I bet the Aes Sedai send you right back to cringing.”

“I never cringed!”

While she fumed, Elayne stood with her arms crossed, rubbing at her chin. “Nynaeve, have you thought about ... how we’re going to be received?” she asked plaintively.

Nynaeve looked at Elayne in astonishment. They had crossed half the world, or near enough, and defeated the Black Ajah twice. Well, they had had help in Tear, but Tanchico had been all their doing. They brought news of Elaida and the Tower she was willing to bet no-one in Salidar had. And most importantly, they could help these sisters make contact with Rand. “Elayne, I won’t say they will greet us as heroes, but it wouldn’t surprise me if they kissed us before today is done.” Rand alone would be worth that. Elayne didn’t look very convinced, though.

Nynaeve left the tent. The land before them was thickly overgrown, all vines and dusty undergrowth. No-one had lived in this part of Altara for some time. But it would take a lot more than a few thornbushes to stop Nynaeve al’Meara. A lot more.

CHAPTER 6: Elayne the Maker



Elayne was a good bit less blasé about their upcoming return to the Aes Sedai fold than Nynaeve. For one thing, the Aes Sedai were sure to put an end to her experiments with the *ter'angreal*. Such things were accounted dangerous, and not without cause, but she was sure she was close to a breakthrough. She was not as reckless as Nynaeve thought, however, nor blind to the dangers. She wished she had more time. *Wishes patch no holes*, Lini would have said.

“Did you say something?” Birgitte asked. She had gathered her skirts over one arm, unashamedly baring her legs to well above her knees so she could adjust her boots, and those sheer silk stockings did not hide as much as breeches.

Such a strange woman. She wasn't sure sometimes if she'd bonded a Warder or been captured by one. Nynaeve's tongue had nothing on Birgitte's. She really should have required some oath of obedience, or at least some show of proper respect. She would have to remember that once it came time to bond Rand. Birgitte was watching her, blue eyes narrowed. A focused knowing dominated the emotions the bond showed her. A bond that worked both ways.

Blushing slightly, Elayne left the tent. The camp was abustle that morning. Despite days spent travelling, all while fully aware of their destination, the thought of their imminent arrival still caused a flurry of last minute preparations. Elayne could not judge. In hindsight, she really should have started her experiments earlier.

When Birgitte caught up to her, wearing a sour expression as if she were driven almost beyond endurance, neither of them spoke. They sought out Nynaeve instead, and found her sat by a nearby stream, already eagerly washing the red from her hair.

With Moghedien safely behind them, the need for disguises was past. Such things would do more harm than good in Salidar. Birgitte and Elayne washed the black out of their hair with Nynaeve's pokeleaf, restoring their natural brightness. It helped to restore Elayne's mood as well.

“I wonder who we'll find there,” she mused. “No Reds, presumably. But it will be interesting to see who chose to side with Elaida.”

“It will say a lot about them, that's for sure,” Nynaeve said as she towelled her hair dry.

“Who's good and who's bad?” There was a wryness in Birgitte's voice, and the bond suggested a woman setting a trap.

Nynaeve did not fall for it. “I suppose they could have other reasons. Those will say a lot about them, too.”

Birgitte's smile was genuine. “I suppose we are going back to using our own names as well. Not that Maerion isn't one of my names, of course. Just not the most recent.”

“A less famous one, too,” Elayne hinted.

But for all her cautions, Birgitte resumed her own name later that same morning. The revelation didn't occasion much comment in truth. Juilin even looked faintly embarrassed on her behalf, taking off that silly red hat to scrub at his dark hair.

By then people were getting ready to ride, and Elayne was running out of time. If she was going to try it, it would have to be soon, so she left the others to clear away the remains of breakfast, picked up a rock of appropriate size, and went apart.

Would the rock be enough? She didn't know if it mattered what material was used. All the *a'dam* she'd seen had been formed from silvery metal, however, and the ring Verin had given her was stone. It would be best to form her copy from the same. Taking the *ter'angreal* from her pouch, she sat cross-legged with it in one hand and the rock in the other. Shaping the stone into the physical form Verin's ring shared would be relatively easy. And perhaps unnecessary, too, but she decided to err on the side of caution there as well. Embracing the Source, she allowed the warm glory of *saidar* to wash away her fears, and channelled into the stone.

Earth wasn't her strongest element, but working something that small was no great strain. The stone flowed like water, becoming first a circle, then a hollow circle, then a hollow circle that twisted in on itself.

"What are you doing?" someone demanded.

It was almost enough to wreck Elayne's concentration. "Be quiet!" she snapped. With a last few touches, she finished her channelling, holding now a perfect copy of the ring, albeit only a copy of its physical form. Now would come the hard part: copying the complex weaves locked within the *ter'angreal*, one of which, she could only assume, was what allowed them to continue to operate long after any tied off weave would have unravelled.

"Is that ... Are you trying to copy it!? That's madness, Elayne! You'll hurt yourself!"

It didn't help that Keestis' high-pitched words were simply an echo of her own concerns. "Don't interfere."

"Don't interfere!? You expect me to just stand by while you kill yourself? Give me that!"

Elayne barely managed to snatch the *ter'angreal* away from Keestis' hand, and could only stare in outraged disbelief as she kept trying to grab it off her. She gasped when her supposed friend had the sheer temerity to take a grip of her hair to try and hold her still so she could steal her ring. "Unhand me! How dare you attack your Daughter-Heir!"

"I'm protecting you!" she claimed, but Elayne's real protector was at hand. Birgitte had been drawn by the noise, and stood now within striking distance of Keestis' back. She stood. And stood some more, until tears threatened to spill from Elayne's disbelieving eyes. Betrayal piled on betrayal.

"Enough of this," Elayne growled. She did not need protecting anyway. She was a grown woman now, and an experienced adventurer. Had not she fought and defeated the Black Ajah? Well, sometimes. She turned *saidar* against her would be protector, shielding her from the Source and wrapping her in flows of air. Keestis was not weak in the Power, but she could not compare to Elayne.

Anger gave her focus. Rising to her feet so that they could no longer look down on her, she tied off the flows around Keestis and turned her attention back to the ring.

"Elayne, please don't. Stop her!"

Keestis' naked fear brought a frown to Birgitte's brow. "What are you doing anyway?"

"Making," Elayne said grimly.

She held them both before her, the *ter'angreal* stone ring, and the stone she'd formed into a copy of it. Then she focused all her efforts on copying, too, the weaves that made the original something more than merely an object. They were so small that found herself wishing there was something akin to Keestis' lenses, but for the One Power, so that she could better see what she was doing. Had they had such a thing in the Age of Legends? Weaves did not usually look so shrunk. Compressing her own down to a similar size was no easy thing, and required all the dexterity she could muster. She stood there, frowning dramatically for longer than was at all comfortable. Sweat formed on her brow, and still she wove thread after thread, tying them together in as exact a copy as she could manage.

By the end, her arms were trembling but not from the fear Nynaeve and Keestis told her she should feel. She was sure she could do this. She knew! Even so, that last weaving was almost her undoing. It was by far the most complex part, and she could not even begin to guess what it did. All she could do was copy it, and that only barely. It was with no small relief that she tied it off, felt it lock into place within the new stone ring, and allowed herself to release *saidar*.

Keestis was gaping. "What were you doing? There at the end? I couldn't see anything, just feel you channelling."

She bought herself a moment by taking out a white handkerchief and dabbing at her brow. "You saw the rest, but not that?" Keestis nodded. "How odd. Perhaps that is the part that makes it a Talent. And prevents the weaves from unravelling on their own." A dimpled smile bloomed on her face. "My Talent. Perhaps not as good as Healing, but rather useful nonetheless!"

She held her two rings up triumphantly. The fanfare was rather less than she'd hoped. Keestis looked like she was being threatened with a knife, rather than being shown the first new *ter'angreal* the White Tower had produced since the Age of Legends. And Birgitte actually scratched her head in confusion.

"They had whole cities full of those things once. Is Tar Valon not the same?"

"No. I am the first to do something like this in the whole Age!"

The praise remained elusive. “Huh. They kept that quiet.”

Elayne’s dramatic pose faded with a sigh. “Well, it might be useful in the future.” Birgitte’s practicality leaked through the bond and infected her, however. She and Nynaeve already had their own dream *ter’angreal*. And Dani had one, too. Rand didn’t need any, since he had a natural Talent for such things. What was the point of making a fourth, other than being able to say she could Make?

Keestis cleared her throat. “I’m sorry for grabbing you like that. I thought you were going to, to burn yourself out or something. If that thing actually works, then you are sure to be a famous Aes Sedai. Um, well done.”

Elayne’s dignity was too great to permit a second sigh. Though Keestis so easily seeing through her made it all much worse. “Thank you,” she said stiffly. “I forgive you; your heart was in the right place.” She untied the weaves that bound her friend, to prove the truth of her words. After a moment’s hesitation, she offered her the new *ter’angreal* as well. “I shall show you how to use this someday, but not yet. *Tel’aran’rhiod* is dangerous at the moment, and must be avoided.”

Birgitte’s raised brow was saying entirely too much, entirely too silently. And the rather ginger way in which Keestis accepted her miraculous creation from her wasn’t exactly lacking in expression either. It was quite outrageous, in all honesty. If this was one of Thom’s stories, there would be awestruck common folk gathered in a great ring to stare upon her and be moved to tears by her humble nods. All the Aes Sedai who had made light of her in the Tower would come forth to one by one admit their errors. There would even be a passing bard with a troupe of musicians on hand to set the mood. Most disappointing.

As if sent by the Creator herself to make things worse, Nynaeve’s shout blundered through the trees. “Elayne! Where are you? Do you expect us to wait for you all morning? I want to be in Salidar before the sun sets.” The rest of it trailed off into loud but indistinct grumbling, which was probably for the best.

“We should get back. Or we’ll be listening to her all day,” Keestis said, entirely correctly.

She hastened back to camp. Elayne lingered only long enough to glare at Birgitte. “A great lot of help you were,” she growled, and stalked off before the other woman could reply.

Birgitte soon caught up. “Help with what?”

“You just stood and watched her. You are supposed to be my Warder. You are supposed to help me defend myself when I cannot channel.”

Birgitte shrugged casually. “I will defend you when you are in danger, but if the danger is only of being turned over someone’s knee because you’ve behaved like a spoiled child, I will have to decide whether it’s better to let you learn a lesson that might save you the same or worse another time. Telling her you were heir to a throne! Really! If you are going to be Aes Sedai, you had better start practicing how to bend the truth, not break it into shards.”

Elayne gaped. It was not until she stumbled over her own feet that she managed to say, “But I am!”

“If you say so,” Birgitte said, rolling her eyes.

Elayne could not help herself. Nynaeve wielding her tongue like a needle, Keestis yanking on her hair, and now this. She threw back her head and screamed with frustration.

When the sound died, it seemed as if the forest had quieted. High in the trees, some birds were peering at her as if wondering what she was. Coolly, she ignored them. Nothing could worm its way under her skin now. She was as calm as ice, perfectly in control of herself.

“Was that a cry for help,” Birgitte said, tilting her head, “or are you hungry? I suppose I could find a wet nurse in—”

Elayne strode away with a snarl that would have done any lioness proud.

“Finally!” Nynaeve declared as soon as she arrived back. She did make it hard to be glad that she was feeling and acting more herself. Light’s truth but she did. To be fair, most of the others were already mounted, and Areku was stoically holding the reins of Elayne’s horse. She made herself walk slow and serenely towards her, ignoring Nynaeve’s pointed sniff.

“Clear us a path, Ragan,” Nynaeve said as she mounted up. “I mean to be there before dark.”

CHAPTER 7: Out of the Woods



Rand hadn't wanted to bring an army with him despite Moiraine's insistence. Something about bringing such a force against a single rebellious House just didn't sit right with him. He wasn't above trying to intimidate people into cooperation, but there were limits. Which was why it was a relatively small escort that accompanied them through the Cairhienin countryside. At least, which directly accompanied them. Bael's Goshien followed close behind, staying out of sight as only Aiel could. It was a compromise. He could compromise. A little.

He still had an Aiel escort, of course. *Far Dareis Mai* and an equal amount of men from the other societies. He'd brought his Shienaran armsmen as well, hoping to present a more multinational front, but the five of them were not enough to balance the horde of Aiel no matter how heavily armed or armoured. Of the Cairhienin and Tairens who had sworn fealty to him, there were none available that he trusted enough to keep close.

He sighed as he guided *Jeade'en* along the wooded path. Perhaps he was part of the problem.

"Are you thinking of turning back? We could pretend all of this was merely a way to drop Loial off at the *stedding*," Moiraine said. He hoped he was just imagining the mockery in her chiming voice.

Rand firmed his jaw. "No. Between the two of us, we should be able to settle House Damodred with ease. With them out of the way, Riatin will be alone. They can't be crazy enough to think they can take the Sun Throne with so little support."

"It would be a mistake to underestimate how absurd people can be when there are thrones involved," she said. "Or how absurd my relatives can be in general."

"I know you don't like them, but by your own admission you haven't seen them in years." He didn't add that he thought she was being very unreasonable about this whole thing. Her descriptions of the various Damodreds had been implausibly ridiculous. Moiraine wouldn't like hearing that, though, and what she liked and didn't like had come to matter to him more than he would ever have believed.

"Nor did I wish to see them again," she said quietly. The Aes Sedai tugged the hood of her blue cloak forward, hiding her ageless face from him.

Lan had seemingly paid little heed to their conversation, but Rand knew he had heard all. The Warder held his vigil as always, his duty impacted not at all by the knowledge that Aiel screened their march and kept watch for threats. Up ahead, Rand's bannerman Pevin attended to his own duty with a similar grimness. The Banner of Light remained aloft, held steady and true by that broken and silent man. Asmodean rode not far from him, richly dressed with a cased harp tied to his saddle. Rand had significantly less sympathy for the imprisoned Forsaken than he did the scarred bannerman. Raine did not imitate Lan's straight-backed watchfulness, preferring to slouch in her saddle, but with her enhanced senses he suspected that any alarm that needed sounding would be sounded by her first. Aside from the Shienarans, no other non-Aiel were with him. He regretted that, since Aiel were not very popular in Cairhien, or in the rest of the wetlands, but what was was.

They rode on for some time, over a hilly forest floor carpeted with dead leaves. A bird flashed away once, flaring red wings awakening a momentary envy in Rand. Later a squirrel appeared on a branch and chattered at them, lashing a furry white-tipped tail. His gaze was drawn to Aviendha, who trotted along beside his horse, unhindered by her dark skirts. Most women he knew would be scandalised to be seen in public with that light sheen of sweat on their faces—sweating was for men and servants alike—but Aviendha didn't look remotely embarrassed by her state. It occurred to Rand that he probably should be, however.

"Are we close to the manor?" he asked Moiraine.

"I believe so."

"Then it's time for you to ride, Aviendha," he said apologetically. Her hard stare demanded an explanation. "It will look bad for me if I have a pretty girl running around while I sit on my horse. It makes me look lazy, or cruel."

A riot of expressions crossed her face. “You are lazy,” she settled on in the end. Then she fixed her gaze ahead, seeming almost regretful. Naturally, the Maidens did not let a chance to rib Rand or to praise Aviendha pass by. The only surprise was that it was Aviendha herself who silenced them, even managing to drown out Misha’s loud voice. She slapped his leg as sharply, to get him to free the stirrup she used to clamber awkwardly up behind him. It would have been a lot easier if she’d just let him pull her up, but his efforts to do so just made her angrier. He had to tighten his legs and hold hard to the cantle to prevent her from hauling him off his own horse, and the grumbles that caused won him a poke in the ribs.

Rand put his heels to his horse as they set off again. It would serve her right if she fell. They were much further down the path when he relaxed his grip on the arms she’d wrapped around him.

There were not many real forests in the nation of Cairhien. Most of the trees they passed stood four or five or even ten paces apart, tall leatherleafs and pines, taller oaks and trees he did not know, running across the flats or up and down the gentle slopes. Even the undergrowth seemed thinner than back home, the bushes and vines and briars spread out in patches, though some of those were not small.

Raine straightened in her saddle. “Someone comes.”

Slowing, he followed her golden gaze but saw only trees.

Eventually, the crackling of brush and leaves announced to him the presence that Raine had long since detected. The rider who appeared on a long-legged grey gelding with bright-fringed bridle and reins was a Cairhienin woman, short and slender in a dark blue, nearly black, silk riding dress, horizontal slashes of red and green and white running from her neck to below her knees. She was palely beautiful, her hair a fall of ebony, her eyes large dark pools. A small clear green stone hung on her forehead from a fine golden chain fastened in black hair that fell in waves to her shoulders. The resemblance to his still-hooded companion was uncanny. Enough so that he only belatedly noticed the hunting crossbow the woman carried casually raised in one green-gloved hand.

“I do not recall seeing any of you before,” the woman said in a throaty, almost sultry, voice. That much was different. Moiraine’s voice was crystal. The cross-bow lowered, still quite casually, until it pointed rock-steady at Rand’s chest.

He didn’t bother seizing *saidin*. The goosebumps on his skin were enough to tell him that Moiraine was ready. Or Aviendha. Better for this woman if it was Moiraine, the glare the Aiel was shooting over his shoulder and the way her arms had tightened around him did not bode well. Izana didn’t know *saidar* was in play, of course, and quickly put his horse between Rand and the newcomer. Uno cursed, Aiel veiled, and Rand spoke quickly.

“I thought I might like to visit your manor,” he said with a slight bow. “I believe you are the Lady Caraline Damodred?” The slender woman inclined her head, acknowledging the name.

Moiraine’s cousin, and the current High Seat of House Damodred. There were other Damodred women, Moiraine’s half sisters among them, but they would look much older or much younger than this Caraline. She was one of the few remaining claimants to the Sun Throne outside his control, the only relevant one save for the previous queen’s daughter Ailil. He really was pulling all the threads of the Pattern around him, to have her appear.

Lady Caraline slowly raised the crossbow to one side; the cord made a loud snap, launching the broadhead bolt into the air.

“I doubt one would do any good against you,” she said, walking her gelding slowly toward them, “and I would not like you to think I was threatening you.” She looked once at Aviendha—just a glance that ran head to toe, though Rand was sure everything about her was filed away—but aside from that, Lady Caraline kept her eyes on him. She drew rein three paces away, just far enough so he could not reach her before she could dig in her heels. “I can only think of one man matching your description who might come here surrounded by Aiel, but perhaps you will be so kind as to supply a name?”

“I am the Dragon Reborn,” Rand said.

Caraline didn’t look very impressed by that. “So you are the leader of this invasion. You are as young as rumoured.”

“Of this successful invasion. Yes. I require the forces of the Light to unite behind me against the Shadow. You will find me relatively benign to those who do. And intolerant of those who do not.”

“A benign tyrant. How lovely,” she drawled.

Rand thought about it, and then nodded once. "I suppose that is what it comes down to. It's what will get the job done. If I asked the nobles of the world nicely to come help me fight the Dark One, do you think they would?"

Before she could respond a tall black gelding with the look of a warhorse came crashing through the undergrowth, ridden by a man with long greying hair, the front of which had been shaved back. Of medium height, he sat tall in his saddle and had a proud look about him. The stripes that ran down his coat, Rand noted, were of a different colour to Caraline's, but like her he carried a crossbow in one leather-gauntleted hand. He was brandishing a broad-head bolt in the other.

"This came down inches from my face, Caraline, and it has your markings! Just because there's no game is no reason—" He became aware of Rand and his party just then, and his drawn crossbow lowered toward them. "Are these al'Thor's lapdogs, Caraline? I've never believed he would continue to let us sit here unhindered."

Half a dozen more riders appeared behind him, men in long coats and women in riding dresses with wide, thick lace collars. All carrying crossbows. The last of those riders had not halted, horses stamping and tossing heads, before twice as many came struggling through the brush from another direction and pulled up near Caraline, slight, pale men and women in dark clothes with stripes of colour sometimes to below the waist. All with crossbows. Servants afoot came after, labouring and panting with exertion, the men who would dress and carry any downed game. They almost matched Rand for numbers already, and this was merely a hunting party. *Perhaps I should have brought some Tairens and Cairhienin.*

The first man scowled at the Aiel with rather less fear than recent history might warrant, and dared to grip the long hilt of the sword tied to his saddle. "So the day for al'Thor to loose the savages on us has arrived." Caraline gave him an exasperated look that he made a show of not seeing. "A chance to right old wrongs, I say."

There was no angry muttering from the Aiel, only cold eyes and brandished weapons. Stern Tuandha and the easy-going Zell both had arrows trained on the man's chest. That was bad. Rand suspected the only thing keeping this fool alive was his having commanded the Aiel not to attack first on pain of death.

"If it was to be a fight, you would be dead already. We came here to talk," he said.

The man's brow beetled. "You, be quiet. Don't interrupt me. I hate being interrupted. Rude."

One of the Aiel yanked down his veil to reveal a tanned, lined, and angry face. "Even by Treekiller standards this one has no honour. Let me fight him! If I allow him to strike first, your honour will remain."

Rand suppressed a sigh. It was already falling apart. And how like his uncle Jecht to come to his defence at the worst possible time.

"I wish I could say it was a pleasure to see you again, Jovarin. Have you managed to find someone to write that book for you yet?" There was quite the sigh in Moiraine's voice, too.

Caraline and the others shifted their attention to the Aes Sedai. Brows rose when she lowered her hood, but it was not only because they knew that telltale ageless look.

"The annoying little sister?" Jovarin said in surprise. "What are you doing here?"

Mandarb took a step forward before Lan's iron control stilled the warhorse. A good portion of that control was being used on the Warder himself, by Rand's reckoning. By rights, lightning should have been streaking from Lan's eyes towards the Cairhienin lord.

"Have a care, Lord Jovarin," Moiraine said coldly. "You address an initiate of the White Tower, not merely your wife's kin."

While he subsided into sulky silence, the Lady of Damodred remained gracious. "Moiraine? I have often wanted to meet you. Or would you prefer that I address you as Moiraine Sedai?"

"I would," she answered, cool as snow.

If her cousin was offended, it did not show. "You are with ... him?"

"With the Dragon Reborn, indeed."

Jovarin was even more surprised by that. He looked at Rand as if at an idiot. "You came in person? Haven't you ever heard of envoys? Foolish. It must be nice, having so much free time. Should give you plenty of time to think about your future."

"They would not miss just one," Jecht muttered.

“Cairhien’s future is worth thinking of. And House Damodred’s role in that future may be as well,” Rand said. Moiraine was only half right so far. Caraline didn’t seem so bad. Perhaps this venture wouldn’t be a complete disaster.

Jovarin quietened then, for some reason. He pulled his horse around to face Caraline. “There’s no game to be found today. Toram has already returned to the manor. I suggest we do the same.”

“Quite. Our guests *may* enjoy the hospitality,” she said.

“You would let a male channeler or an Aiel near my children? Outrageous.”

She hesitated. “Wishing will not change the political landscape. And I am High Seat, not Innloine. They will be my guests.”

The other Cairhienin were altogether warier than Jovarin and less accepting than Caraline. He saw suspicion and fear in most eyes as the two groups arrayed for a shared destination. They did not merge, no more than oil and water would, but at least they did not clash.

Rand didn’t particularly want to ride with the Cairhienin, and would have had to push past the Aiel to do so anyway. Sulin and Jecht between them had decided he was not allowed to mix with the “treekillers”. It was hard not to feel babied.

Mangin was watching him, a small smile on his face. “Should I run back to ask your second-sister-mother to come join us, Rand al’Thor?”

He meant Rand’s aunt Dana, who was following with the Goshien Wise Ones. Dana was nowhere near as smothering as Mangin implied, but that wasn’t his point. “I don’t think we need her,” he muttered. “The Maidens brought all my favourite dolls already.”

Said Maidens were not best pleased, but Mangin laughed. “Will they rock you to sleep I wonder? Not that you mind being cradled and taken care of every once in a while.”

That naked teasing made him wary. There were things done in private that should not be spoken of in public. Mangin didn’t seem to notice his wariness, though, and spoke on. “The treekillers could not find game, but I wager we could. We should go hunting again, you and I.”

Rand tried to compose himself, but it was hard to fight the blush when your heart started beating so fast. He was aware of eyes on him, despite staring straight ahead. One pair belonged to Izana, riding ahead but looking back, his nearly black eyes looking very large all of a sudden. Their gazes touched, then flinched away at once.

“Perhaps some other time,” Rand said tightly.

“Did something happen?” he heard Izana mutter.

They’d covered a fair bit of distance before Caraline Damodred parted from her followers to approach Rand. The Aiel proved truculent at first, but he swiftly moved to put an end to that, ordering their guard ring to part that he might go ride with the lady. On they pressed, the two groups keeping their distance, but their leaders riding knee to knee.

“Reports claim the Sun Throne still sits vacant,” she said.

Rand grunted. “I don’t want it for myself. The other Cairhienin seemed surprised by that. I think they expected me to do as the High Lord Meilan intended, and make myself king.”

“A Tairen king of Cairhien. That would have been amusingly brief.”

“*Daes Dae’mar*.”

“Indeed.”

“They play it in Tear, too.” To his dismay.

“I have heard honest Tairens say so,” Caraline said, smiling as though she found the suggestion hilarious.

Rand had learned a little of that game himself, from Moiraine. He hated it. But with her watching and listening, he felt compelled to try and put her lessons to use.

“Cairhien needs a queen of Cairhienin blood. I need a queen, too.”

He did a better job of schooling his face this time. Just as well, too, considering the eyes on him. The stark family resemblance between Caraline and Moiraine made the mere thought of pursuing her uncomfortable to Rand, but he was interested in gauging her ambition.

She hid her own thoughts well, and took her time about responding. “Many candidates for that role have risen and fallen, have they not?”

Was that an innuendo? He couldn’t tell, and didn’t want to push it. “And new ones emerge every day.”

"Many of those who reached so bravely lie dead here in Cairhien. We survivors can but marvel at their courage." *Or scoff at their foolishness*, he heard.

"Wise counsel can allay such. The wise councillor is loved by most." *And so safe.*

"Counsel such as the value of stealth. Something your Aiel friends know well."

"Though famed, they do not seek a stage."

"Unlike you." Was that amusement in her dark eyes, or scorn?

Rand's lips twisted bitterly. "I meant to die," he said with sudden honesty. "There is little good to be found on this stage, or in the story I have been given to read."

Caraline fell silent, enough so that he could hear Moiraine's faint tutting. Should he have told her that? Probably not. All this insincerity weighed on him, though. He would much rather just be direct. "Do you still want the throne?" he asked abruptly.

"Not really," Caraline said at once. Her mouth fell slowly open, in a way that reminded him all too much of her brother Barathanes, the bizarrely honest Darkfriend whom she had inherited control of House Damodred from.

"Why not?"

Having started, she chose to continue, though she still looked shocked. "Too many have died already in the fight for it. I don't even hate Ailil Riatin, nor do I think she would be any worse or better as queen than I would. Are we to kill each other for the throne? It feels so pointless. I've ridden across fields of rotting corpses. I've seen my own kin maimed and murdered. I want all that to end, far more than I want the throne."

"Interesting answer," Rand said carefully. He couldn't decide whether he believed it or not. It was so very much what he wanted to hear. And the Cairhienin prided themselves on a good lie. Moiraine was as inscrutable as ever, but he could tell she was filing away every word. They would discuss it later.

Caraline gathered herself. "What of you, cousin? How does the White Tower see the Sun Throne's future?"

"Tarmon Gai'don is coming and the Light must prevail. That which might otherwise be considered distasteful may be endured if it facilitates that outcome." Moiraine's eyes were cool on Rand. Whether it was due to distaste for his rule or distaste for his making her come back to her abandoned home was hard to say.

The woods thinned but the hills waved on ahead. In the distance he could see walls encircling the top of one of the taller hills. Caraline steered them that way. As they drew closer he saw that the Damodred manor had not escaped the war undamaged. Timber had replaced stone in some places, and the black mark of old burns could be seen surrounding the gateway they rode towards. The gate itself showed signs of inexpert repair, and the guards had to haul hard to move it aside for their mistress.

Within the walls, they suddenly came on a knot of spearmen, some with a dented breastplate or helmet, most without either, who bowed as soon they saw the party. To left and right Rand could see other groups of sentries. There were tents scattered across the manor grounds, surrounding a lavish structure of four stories. Each of the few tents was large, with some noble's banner hanging limply on a staff above the peak. Almost as many horses stood tied to picket lines as there were people, and thousands of men and a handful of women wandered among the cookfires and wagons. None raised a cheer as their leader rode in.

They certainly didn't cheer at the sight of Rand and his Aiel, whom they outnumbered pretty badly. Wondering if he'd made a mistake, he seized *saidin* and glanced over his shoulder, past a worried looking Aviendha. Back among the trees, a redwing called three times in quick succession.

He held on to *saidin* as he studied the gathering, not caring whether Caraline saw what he was doing. Dispirited faces watched them pass, and grim faces, people who knew the fight had gone against them. Here and there a House's *con* stood stiffly above some man's head, yet most seemed to be wearing whatever they could find, bits and pieces of armour that often neither matched nor fitted very well.

Caraline and Jovarin dismounted at the edge of a paved courtyard fronting the manor, from the peaked roof of which the Rising Sun of Cairhien was stirring in a lazy breeze, gold on blue. The tree and crown of House Damodred shared pride of place with it, gold on black.

"Ambition and darkness," Moiraine murmured when she saw him looking.

Rand dismounted wordlessly. The strumming of harps drifted out amid the murmur of voices, like the sounds of geese. He'd strode into the royal court of Cairhien and mounted the dais to stand beside their throne, but somehow the thought of pushing his way past the double doors ahead gave him pause. "May we enter your home?"

"You may," said Caraline. "My servants will find a place for your escort to rest."

"The *Car'a'carn* will not enter this hold alone," Sulin insisted, more to Rand than to her.

"Quite," agreed Moiraine.

"Armed strangers have burst into this place before, cousin. There are children within who recall it well. Have you no care for them?"

Aviendha certainly did not. She disdained Rand's offered lift to hop down from the horse herself. Her blue-green eyes demanded she be allowed to accompany him, and Rand didn't want to imagine what kind of scene she'd make if he didn't arrange it.

"Naturally you would not refuse a relative of the chief of the Taardad Aiel," he said, gesturing to Aviendha. Her aunt being one of Rhuarc's wives counted for precisely nothing with the Aiel, but Caraline had no reason to know that. "And I am sure you would not insult me by turning my own uncle away from your door."

Jecht frowned, but was not so foolish as to argue over having the wetlander term applied to him just then.

Jovarin matched his frown. "So you really are Aiel."

Rand chose not to clarify. He spread an arm and looked at Raine, who came warily and blushed when he rested his arm across her shoulders. Her hair had grown a little longer than when they'd first met, though it was still very short for a girl, and the fine green dress he'd bought her back in Tear was a match in quality for anything these snooty nobles might have. He saw no reason she should be embarrassed. His silent stare dared Jovarin to say anything.

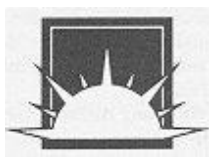
While Rand prevaricated, Moiraine took a more direct approach. "The Maidens of the Spear will come with my Warder and I, their feminine aspects being frightening only to adults. Bards are always welcomed, of course. The remaining men will wait here, much as the army following us will wait outside your walls, Lady Caraline. Unless something very unwise occurs."

"Your terms are acceptable, Moiraine Sedai," said the lady after a tight-lipped pause.

As servants took away the horses, Jovarin offered his arm to Caraline. After a very long pause, she laid her fingers lightly on his wrist with no expression whatsoever, letting him escort her inside.

Rand, staring at Moiraine, hesitated to follow. How had it come to be that he was the one dancing with truths and she was being bluntly honest? It felt so wrong. He offered her his arm, just as Jovarin had. She mirrored Caraline almost perfectly then, too. Escorting her into her home didn't feel very wrong at all.

CHAPTER 8: House Damodred



Moiraine leaned on her Aes Sedai training more than on Rand's arm as she returned to that hated place. The sentries on the door were alarmed by the thought of letting Aiel enter but knew better than to object. House Damodred had never been kind to its servants. Especially foolish ones who thought a few spearwomen more dangerous than three channelers. Moiraine alone could have levelled the entire building. In the early days of her training at the White Tower, she had fantasized about doing so. Unworthy thoughts, long behind her now. Her hand tightened on Rand's arm. An unworthy relationship, clung to in a way that was beneath her. She had to let him go.

The entrance hall was not as huge as she remembered, but what could be after living in the Tower? The furnishings were much changed from the days when her notorious aunt Laina had been High Seat and Queen both. Few unwelcome memories assailed Moiraine at the sight, merely a curiosity at the relative lack of grandeur. Even here there were signs of war. Plainly the manor had been not been proof against Damodred's rivals, though just as plainly said rivals had been repelled.

The tree and crown still hung from balcony above, though, and beneath it were arrayed faces familiar and otherwise. Anvaere folded her arms angrily as soon as her narrow eyes fixed on Moiraine. There was grey in her still boyishly short hair. Innloine, who stood at her sister's side, had gone completely grey and thickened alarmingly. It threatened Moiraine's composure more than she would ever have admitted. They looked so old! One of the many benefits of channelling the One Power was how it slowed the aging process. She had gotten used to appearing and feeling younger than she was. Faced with her half-sisters again, neither of which was that much older than her, she felt a sudden impulse to snatch her hand away from Rand.

He didn't notice, being busy studying her estranged kin. So tall he was, and appallingly handsome. His long coat hid it, of course, but she well recalled how smoothly strong his body was. All the blessings of youth were his. She couldn't help but imagine how Innloine or Anvaere would have looked walking in arm in arm with him. It was a struggle to fight down the blush.

Especially when their lined faces did not do a very good job of hiding that their thoughts had ventured down the same path. She saw resentment there, and her embarrassment evaporated in hidden anger. How many times had these two women sneered at her and her commonborn mother? Let them seethe. She patted Rand's hand familiarly, and smiled. "Rand, allow me to introduce you to my half-sisters. Anvaere is the single one, while Innloine is a mother many times over." She didn't bother indicating which was which. "Anvaere, Innloine, meet the Dragon Reborn, current ruler of Cairhien."

"A pleasure," he said, calm and aloof. She knew he had noticed the way they scowled at her, and knew it would count against them. That should not have pleased her but there was no reason to fight it. Not when Caraline had proven surprisingly promising, and there were so many other Damodreds who might serve his goals as well.

Innloine looked at him with more fear than desire. That fear only increased when she saw the Aiel crowding behind him. She had never been the bravest or brightest. "You let them bring weapons here?" she whispered fiercely at Caraline. Moiraine didn't think she would have heard save for her *saidar*-enhanced hearing. Having failed to persuade Rand against this folly, she had no intention of releasing the Source until it was over and done with. There had been benefits to his stubborn independence, but at moments like this it was hard not to still feel that it would be better if he would just do what she told him. In the face of his wife's anger, Jovarin disentangled himself from Caraline.

Caraline was unmoved, however. "If the numbers are even a tenth of those reported," she said under her breath, "then we have no hope of winning. This does not increase our danger. Quite the opposite."

And what did that mean? She glanced at Lan, who had dismissed any of the Damodred men as a physical threat and pushed a curtain aside that he might watch for signs of trouble outside. Jecht had taken the window on the other side of the main entry. The two men did not get along, but they knew

their jobs. She left them—and the Maidens who were unashamedly opening doors to peer inside for threats—to their tasks and returned to her own.

“And before us we have the latest generation of the Damodred legacy,” she said, while wondering how many of those innocent faces would add to its darkness. They were all dressed in the Damodred colours, the cut of each striped coat or dress perfectly in keeping with tradition.

“Indeed, where are my manners?” said Caraline, knowing that Moiraine was as unfamiliar with her nieces and nephews as she was with her cousin. “I am sure you recall Laman, Moiraine.” The man she indicated had a lined brow and a sour countenance. It was hard not to stare, for Innloine’s eldest had been a child when she left. “Lord Acandrin and his wife, Lady Maenvaere of House Maravin.” Acandrin gave her a casual wave. He had grown into a slender and pretty man, the front of his dark hair unshaven. His morose-looking wife wore hers in the traditional fashion as well. It was notable that the second son was married but the eldest was not. She had often wondered if Innloine’s avoidance of the Great Game was due to disinterest or fear. If she was keeping her eldest’s hand available, then she was not without interest in the alliance he might make her.

Altogether different concerns awaited, as Caraline’s graceful hand and uncommonly deep voice continued down the line. “Lady Liliwaere I don’t believe you’ve met. Lili, this is your aunt Moiraine. She has brought a notorious young man with her, as well as many Aiel women, most of which are armed. Also in attendance are two male warriors and a ... young woman with yellow eyes.”

“Hello there. Pleased to meet you,” Liliwaere said. Like Raine, it was her eyes that one noticed first, if for very different reasons. A foggy paleness overlay them. She was staring straight ahead, rather than peering curiously at the strangers like the rest of the family was. Blind. When had this happened? She would learn soon enough, but not in such a public manner. The poor child was striving for elegance, and Moiraine would not threaten that.

“I’m her little sister. My name is Hidaile. It’s nice to meet you,” piped one while Caraline was still working her way down the line.

“Lady Rosaline is not very talkative, but please don’t take offense, while young Hidaile here talks far too much. Try to forgive her, too,” Caraline finished.

The youngest, a child in truth, objected to this vocally, while Rosaline took no notice. Moiraine understood why. That letter had been difficult to answer. Rosaline was the same height as Moiraine but her hair barely brushed her shoulders. Eyes as dark as all the other Damodreds’ darted constantly in stark contrast to her elder sister’s. She would be Rand’s age now, and he was the one who captured her attention most, but none of the newcomers escaped her scrutiny.

Those eyes touched Moiraine’s, their directness undimmed by her status. Was there accusation there? They should not have come here, but since they were they might as well find some point to it. “A fine family you have made for yourself, Innloine. It can be hoped they will have a fine future ahead of them.”

“It will be no thanks to you, of course,” her half-sister said, mouth twisting. “Laina, Moressin and their children. Uncle Aldecain and his wife. Barthanes. All dead. The throne, our reputation, lost. Our home nearly burned to the ground. But only now do you appear. The vaunted Aes Sedai.”

“She’s not here for us,” said Anvaere. Her shrug dismissed Moiraine’s reasons, as it dismissed most things. Anvaere had never had many friends, a situation entirely of her own choosing. She liked horses, hawking and girls, though she rarely kept company with the latter for long. She was more interested in the Maidens of the Spear than this reunion, or even meeting the dreaded Dragon Reborn. Anvaere did look worried by the anger invoking Laina’s name in front of the Maidens caused, however, though Moiraine was unconcerned. If that was going to be an issue, it would have become one already.

“Perhaps not in a personal manner, so let us set such things aside and address the concerns of today,” said Caraline. “With the niceties concluded, we adults should speak in private.”

Would Rand’s presence help or hinder the negotiations? As far as he’d come, the answer was still plain to her. “Immediate family only, I think. Lord Jovarin and Lady Maenvaere would be happy to entertain our guests I am sure.”

He’d come far enough to narrow his eyes at her. Cutting him out of the loop like that might well have caused a scene once, but he’d grown less offensively distrustful since they began sharing a bed. It was one of the reasons she could not regret that outrageous decision.

“Don’t give away the barn,” he murmured, and released her hand.

“Entertaining guests,” Maenvaere sighed. “Wonderful.”

“Better that than this reunion,” Anvaere muttered, still plainly unaware Moiraine could hear. She tried to remind herself that she wasn’t here to settle matters with her half-sisters. The mission came first, always.

Acandrin linked arms with his wife and led her away from the rest. “You can choose your friends, but you can’t choose your family,” he said with an easy smile.

“Or your husband,” Maenvaere added, wiping his smile away.

He kept his aplomb and took his youngest sister by the hand. “I suppose my position here would be best described as a babysitter.”

“That is demeaning,” Hidaile objected.

“Really? Maybe I’ll change my title once you get a few more years on you. Or at least a few inches.”

Their bickering was relatively benign compared to what Moiraine recalled of her own childhood. She glided past them and did not look back. Lan wanted to accompany her, but he kept his post, fully aware she would refuse the offer. It was only Moiraine, her half-sisters and Caraline who climbed the wide stairway that dominated one side of the entrance hall.

Down below, she could see Rand making stiff-necked conversation with Laman. Aviendha and Raine were making no effort to socialise, nor did they look on anyone present as anything less than a potential threat. He was lucky in them.

Moving farther down the hall, she addressed a more immediate, more personal concern. “How recent are Lilivaere’s injuries?”

“You ask that? After Rosaline?” Innloine snapped.

“The prohibition asking speaking untruths applies to the written word as well,” Moiraine said coolly. “As I explained, the One Power can only be used to heal the body back to what it considers its natural state. It cannot make a non-channeler younger, nor regrow limbs, nor remove old scars. After a time, the body adjusts and comes to accept the injury as natural. Rosaline’s deafness was never something I could have Healed. Depending on how recent Lilivaere’s injury is, however, I may be able to help her.”

Innloine’s unfamiliarly rounded face softened. “I pray it is so. She faces it bravely, but she shouldn’t have to live like that. My sweet girl.”

She didn’t go on, though. Her mouth opened and closed but no more words emerged. Anvaere told the tale she could not. “It happened during House Saighan’s surprise attack. Most of our forces were in the field, engaged with Riatin’s. Caraline didn’t expect Colavaere to have the nerve to move against us.”

Caraline’s grace was not limitless it seemed. There was something fascinating in watching a face that nearly mirrored her own—minus the agelessness—twist into such a fierce scowl. “When has Saighan ever dared attack Damodred? You were all surprised as well!”

Anvaere shrugged that shrug of hers. “Things happen during war that wouldn’t happen during peace. Shocker. Our armsmen managed to hold theirs at key chokepoints, and counter attacked to retake the gates, but the raiders that had gotten inside already decided to torch the manor before retreating. It was the fire that hurt her, a burst of sparks from collapsing timbers. Would have been worse save for that girl.”

“During the Civil War.” A war that had lasted just over a year. She did not hold much hope. “I pray you tell me it was towards the end, rather than the beginning.”

Innloine’s eyes were wet. Anvaere’s dry. “Closer to the beginning. Saighan’s sun waxed on the back of that boldness, and ours waned as news of our weakness spread.”

“That is too long ago,” Moiraine said, though they already knew.

Innloine sighed. “They used to play together. As they got older the fighting started but I hoped that would blow over after a while. But how are they to communicate when one is deaf and the other blind? They might as well be ghosts to each other.”

Moiraine would not say she was sorry, regrettable as the situation was. One should never apologise for the way the world was, or what had to be done.

Caraline lengthened her stride, and opened the door to the office ahead. Hers now, it had belonged to Laina Treekiller when Moiraine was a girl, though the queen had rarely used it.

The fire damage had not touched that office and its well-preserved, antique furniture. History was in there. But it wasn't history that captured Moiraine's attention when she stepped into the room with her hated half-sisters standing right behind her.

It was the four Aes Sedai waiting inside, and their blood red dresses.

* * *

Being called on to socialise with people whose company he was imposing on for political reasons wasn't exactly a comfortable situation for Rand. It was one he was going to have to get used to, however. Besides, he had reasons to want to know these people, reasons only tangentially connected to their relation to Moiraine. Someone had to sit the Sun Throne. Moiraine refused to, and claimed Elayne was a poor choice. Rand wasn't sure he agreed with her on that. If not Elayne, who?

Caraline herself said all the right things, for the sister of a Darkfriend. There was no reason to think she'd known what Barthanes was, but no reason not to either. He dismissed Innloine and Anvaere right away, and would have even if Moiraine hadn't outlined how unsuited they were. And the younger ones?

It wasn't just Rand who had been made awkward by the elder Damodreds' withdrawal. Laman had approached Raine, whose taciturn responses and naked wariness inspired Aviendha to join. Rand couldn't hear what was said, but he could read the resentment on the man's face as he looked at the Aiel girl. Looked up at her, his neck stretching instinctively. Was it her height or the fact that she was Aiel? Either way, it was a sign of poor character, in Rand's opinion, and did not bode well.

Not that putting a man on the Sun Throne would have been wise in the first place. Kings ruling in their own right were rare in the histories of any Valgardan nation. The idea appealed to him for just that reason, but the sensible thing to do would be to pick a woman.

Acandrin might be a better choice than his brother, if he went that route. He had an easy grace about him. He stood with his wife and sisters, none of which dared approach Rand but all of whom hinted at their awareness of him in other ways.

"I never took after the athletic side of the family, anyway," his sister Lili said in response to a joking comment he'd made about some of the bigger Maidens. Much better.

"Well, you can take heart in the fact that you inherited the height at least. And the bust ..." Acandrin teased.

"That's not really the right kind of thing to say around others ..." the blind girl said primly, but it had the ring of friendly banter rather than offense.

He wasn't wrong about the bust. Both of Moiraine's grown nieces took after their mother in that regard, rather than their aunts. They had their aunt's beauty, though. Fair skin, jet-black hair, dark eyes. Damaged dark eyes, in Lili's case, and piercing ones in the case of her quiet sister Rosaline. He was right on height as well. Rosaline was as short as Moiraine, but Lili would likely have stood eye to eye with Elayne. It made sense, he supposed. Barthanes had been unusually tall for a Cairhienin, and Taringail, Elayne's father, must have been as well, to have such tall children.

Acandrin's wife was a Maravin, hadn't they said? That House was notable, if not quite as powerful as Damodred or Riatin. It could help. Maenvaere's long face gave her a solemn appearance, but he thought her pretty in her way, until he saw the hostility in her narrow brown eyes. She looked away at once. He did not. Hostility from the Damodreds towards an unwelcome visitor he might expect, but from her?

He was still pondering when Jovarin clapped his hands together once. "Why are we standing in this hall? Awkward. Laman, have the servants bring refreshments to the east sitting room."

The lord led the way himself, but a hard hand on Rand's shoulder prevented him from drifting along with the rest. Lan leaned close and lowered his voice. "Drink from nothing you have not seen another drink from. Moiraine does not trust them, and she would know better than any."

Jecht shook his head. "Imagine not being able to trust your own sept or clan."

Many of the Maidens echoed his disdain. Rand was glad that Nici, his secret Shaido lover, had not accompanied them today. She got more than enough abuse over her clan's actions.

For all their suspicions, Lan and Jecht did not come with him. Asmodean, did, while doing a very poor impression of a sociable bard. Even the younger Damodreds had looked put off by his sour

sulk. His Maidens came as well, of course, padding stealthily in the wake of their hosts. Tuandha and Misha stopped abruptly when one of the doors they passed quietly began to open.

A thin girl with long black hair crept out. She gasped when she saw the armed women, up on their toes and eyeing her coldly. Brown eyes large with fear stared over the hand she clapped to her mouth. She wore a dress of dark green livery, a maid plainly. He would have kept going but that hand drew his attention. There were dark marks on the back of it; old burns, he realised. The maid's hair was brushed forward, hanging in such a way as to hide the right side of her face. It was a vain effort, for he could see glimpses of the same dark burns there. Sympathy surged in him.

"Leave her be, she's no threat."

The girl's eyes remained huge when on him. She must have heard what he was.

"Do not look at him so pitifully. Are you a woman or a puppy?" Tuandha said with surprising heat. The one-eyed Maiden's face was scarred in a not dissimilar way to this girl's. Why the sudden anger? He would have expected empathy.

"P-please ... let ... m-me go," the maid said, her voice barely audible.

Rand stepped in. "No-one is going to stop you. Or hurt you. We'll be on our way." She didn't look likely to respond, and he didn't want to make her feel pressured to, so he walked off. The Maidens followed, with Tuandha adroitly avoiding his effort to catch her eye.

Due to the delay Jovarin was on his way back out of the sitting room by the time Rand caught up. "What were you up to?" he asked, with what Rand was coming to suspect was a habitual rudeness.

"My Maidens scared one of your maids. I wanted to reassure her," Rand said, unruffled.

"Which one was it?"

"Long, dark hair. Kind of shy. She had ... well ... some scars ... on her ... face," he said.

His daughter Lili was leaning on his arm, probably for help getting around. "You wouldn't be talking about Hana, would you?"

"I didn't catch her name. It was hard to hear what she was trying to say."

"Oh dear. Father, would you excuse me, I had better try and find her." She disentangled herself and stepped carefully towards the door, her hand outstretched before her. The Maidens moved out of her way, fingers flashing in their secret language. Blind to that, Lili found the wall and let her fingers brush along it as she wandered off. Rand found himself shivering. Something about the thought of going blind filled him with horror. That girl was braver than him. Surprisingly kind, too, to care so for the feelings of a servant. Few of the nobles he'd met would have spared a single thought for this Hana.

Four sofas surrounded a low square table, which was engraved with the Damodred tree and crown, in the middle of the room. Liveried servants were depositing plates of cold food and warm drinks on the table, around which Acandrin and the others were sitting. The tall, wide windows let in a lot of light, while a low fire burned in the hearth on one side, keeping the room warm. Their task done, the servants retreated to stand near the doorway, ready to run and fetch as needed. Sulin and Elana sneered, fingers flashing in handtalk. Though an Aiel by blood only, Rand felt an echo of their distaste.

Muttering about needing to make sure she was okay, Jovarin excused himself and went after Lili. Asmodean spied a drinks table and went straight there. Rand chose to see both events as boons.

Aviendha, Raine and the Maidens were available, but Rand figured he should make an attempt to speak to the strangers instead. He chose an empty sofa and sat down. He saw Aviendha recoil at the thought of sitting at the feet of the Cairhienin. She chose to stand with the Maidens instead, leaving him and Raine alone on the sofa. "These have been a hard few years in Cairhien," Rand said. "I see that even the most powerful have not come through them unharmed."

"Power is sometimes a delusion," Laman said. For Rand as well, he implied.

"Being invaded from south and east at once didn't help," claimed his brother.

Rand had an answer to that. "War added to war, but food brought to starving people. Now we have no war, and food, as opposed to a continued war, and no food."

"I can't argue with that," Acandrin said.

His wife was less easily swayed. "Everyone should welcome you to their homes, so you can improve what they could not."

Her face was still but her anger hard to miss. At her side, Rosaline was scowling openly. "I take it you think I should have left Cairhien to its fate as well?" he asked the latter girl. She crossed her arms and looked away.

“Children are not free to decide their own fate, of course,” Maenvaere answered instead.

She was avoiding saying it straight out. Rand wouldn’t have minded if she did. She and the others were avoiding using his name or titles, too. If they thought that would bother him, they were very mistaken. “Whether interfering or not was right is debateable,” he said, “but the need to have humanity’s resources devoted to fighting the Shadow instead of each other trumps all.”

“The Shadow,” Laman breathed, but not in fear. He scoffed, as though at a child’s tale. Entirely too many of those south of the borderlands shared that view. It made things harder, but Rand could not be as angry with them as he wanted. He too well recalled the shock and disbelief he’d felt on encountering his first Trolloc and learning what had only been story was actual truth. “I need a drink,” Laman said, before rising and going to a side table, where something a bit stronger than tea could be seen. His brother went with him, whispering. If they were whispering anything noteworthy, he was sure Raine would tell him.

“Do you like stories, too?” little Hidaile asked Rand. “I’m bored. Would you like to play a game?” She took a stones board and a cloth pouch from under the table and began setting up.

“No thank you. I have important work to do.” He doubted playing games with a girl of ten was what diplomats usually did on visits like this.

“Why are you upset? That is why we are here,” said Hidaile. “To entertain. Besides, didn’t you want to talk to Rosaline?”

The middle daughter was still sitting silently, arms folded across her bosom. “She doesn’t seem interested,” he said. She ignored that.

Her sister smiled, though. “Exactly. That is why we should play a game. It’s a Rosaline trap. You can trap anything, including people. If we compete against each other in the spirit of good sport, she will be drawn here to challenge the winner, like a wolf smelling blood. Then I will defeat her like a hunter. Then remind her of it forever.”

“Strange way to speak about your sister,” Rand muttered. They were a strange bunch, all told.

Raine looked confused, too. “Don’t chase blood. Blood could be danger.”

He wasn’t very eager to take Hidaile up on the challenge. He knew the basics of the game but had never liked it, and certainly didn’t play it regularly enough to be confident of his abilities. Defeat would be embarrassing. He decided to cover his ass a little. “This is the one where you surround the other pieces isn’t it? I’ve seen that before.”

Riallin and Misha, two of the younger Maidens, leant on the sofa to peer over his shoulder. He knew what they would say long before they said it. “*Ji’e’toh* forbids us to beat up a child, Rand al’Thor. We cannot shield your honour here,” Misha declared for all the world to hear.

Rand sighed softly. He should have just made friends with the Red Shields. Rhurarc had been a Red Shield. They wouldn’t give him this kind of trouble. Hidaile was finished setting up by then. She offered Rand a pile of black stones. He accepted reluctantly.

As they played, he was a little relieved at the lack of challenge. He’d half feared he was about to find himself at the mercy of a child prodigy. Hidaile was a bright girl, but he was able to surround many of her pieces using only the basic tactics he’d learned. Her silent sister watched out of the corner of her eye at first, stirring every once in a while to tut at one move or another. She grew visibly annoyed as the game wore on. Soon enough, she had shuffled over and was poking and pointing away.

Hidaile scowled at her, rubbing a sore shoulder. “Stop doing that! Why are you so argumentative?”

Rand let them bicker, preferring to focus on placing his stones. Victory was his, but he made sure to praise the girl’s play. *Behold the political prowess of the Dragon Reborn! I didn’t boast about not being defeated by a ten year old.*

Raine had watched it all, and was frowning thoughtfully. “It’s like a pack hunting,” she said.

Rosaline used her wide hips to batter her outraged little sister aside. She took her stones and began rearranging them. Her eyes met Rand’s, and flashed dangerously with a competitive glare. He shrugged. Losing to a girl his age who obviously had an interest in the game would be no shame. He started fixing his own stones. She stared at him, as if surprised that he’d challenge her. Her dark and silent gaze was quite alluring.

“This one is a hunter,” Raine said.

They played, and Rand knew at once that he was up against it. Rosaline placed her stones with confident alacrity. When it was his turn, she drummed her fingers on the table impatiently. He ignored

that annoyance, taking his time and thinking through as many of the possibilities as he could imagine. She slashed at his pieces, thinking to win it all quickly. He remained dogged in defence, spotting and blocking any number of captures, trying to make sure than any losses he incurred came at a heavy price. Excitement lit those black eyes of hers.

“You really like this game,” he said. She shook her head at him silently and went back to studying the board.

She had the advantage, despite his best efforts. If they just kept trading pieces he was going to lose. A trick was needed. A cunning trap. He thought he saw one, and spent several moves setting it up, taking even more losses in the process. But when he tried to spring it, he found that she had a counter waiting. Rand’s lips twisted wryly, and he spread his hands in defeat. Rosaline clapped her own in delight.

Maenvaere, who had lingered to watch, smiled for the first time since he’d met her. Rising, she went to speak to her husband about things Rand didn’t want to hear.

Misha and Riallin at least had the decency to keep what they thought of their *Car’a ’carn*’s defeat to handtalk rather than saying it out loud this time. He knew better than to check, but check he did. The look on Riallin’s pretty face was every bit as pitying as he’d expected.

A sudden loud crack made her reach for her veil. She wasn’t the only person surprised. Rosaline cracked her fingers again, leaning over the back of her sofa and pointing imperiously at a drawer. A serving man at least three times her age and twice her weight went to fetch whatever she was demanding.

It proved to be a stack of paper, a pen and an inkpot. The man set them on the table before her and withdrew while Rosaline was scribbling away. Once she was done, she spun the paper in place.

Rand frowned as he leant forward. “Why are you writing?” he said absently as he read.

Why do they keep wiggling their fingers at each other? she had written, in a tightly elegant hand.

She was watching him, waiting with that same barely contained impatience for his answer. Rand felt his face heat, and not because of a pretty girl staring. She handed him the pen at once when he reached for it.

Are you deaf? he wrote under her message, in his own blunt hand.

Rosaline rolled her eyes as soon as she read it. She reclaimed the pen.

Yes. Answer the question!

Feeling like an utter heel, Rand penned a lengthier response. *I’m sorry. I didn’t realise. I thought you just weren’t feeling friendly.*

Amusement and annoyance danced on her face as she read. She wrote as fast as she moved her stones. *My Lord Dragon. I am very offended! That makes me sad ... In order to atone for hurting a young lady’s feelings, you should definitely pledge to do her bidding!*

She was watching his face as he read. When he looked up he found her doing an odd little bounce on the sofa. Laughing silently, he realised. It was oddly charming, enough so to douse his anger at the suggestion. Rosaline took the paper back again.

I would accept an explanation of what they were doing as atonement instead, though.

“Why is she pointing at me?” Misha asked.

“She wants to know about handtalk,” Rand said, as he gestured for Rosaline to give him the pen.

That drew Sulin over at once. “Handtalk is for Aiel. Maiden handtalk for Maidens.”

“Relax. I don’t even know it myself,” he said absently, while writing his explanation.

It is something the Aiel use to communicate silently when scouting. Handtalk, they call it. The male version is fairly basic, but the Maidens have turned it into a language. Because even when being silent, women can’t stop talking, the men say. Not me, of course. I would never say that out loud.

Once he was finished he spun the paper around again and watched Rosaline’s face. He saw the excitement bloom there, and could well understand why. He imagined possibilities here as he had in their game, but he imagined obstacles as well. When she reached the end, she pouted at him angrily and began scribbling.

Rude! was all she wrote. The rest of her response she preferred to mull over. Even if the Maidens were willing to teach her, who could she use it with save for Maidens? She would have to teach others, and they’d have to be willing to take the time to learn just to be able speak with one girl.

He'd been bracing himself to have to douse her hopes, but Rosaline looked more serious than excited when she took up the pen again.

I would like to learn. Please.

Rand winced. He looked at Sulin, lowered his voice and spoke solemnly. "She cannot hear or speak, and would like to learn how to use handtalk."

Her frown creased her leathery face yet more. "You should not have asked me that, when you know I must refuse. You shame us both."

"I had to ask," he said, and sighed. He could tell that Rosaline had seen the answer, but wrote it anyway.

Aiel do not like to share their secrets with outsiders. They say handtalk is for them alone to know. I'm sorry. I am their Car'a'carn, but I cannot order them to do it.

It made him sad, watching her bow her head as she read.

Even Misha made a noise of pity at the sight. "Do you feel sorry for her because she is alone?"

"It's a regrettable situation," he said.

Her sister's return saved them all from the uncomfortable silence that descended after that. Lili had found her maid, who was now steering her around by way of a gentle grip on the sleeve of her dress. This Hana hunched her shoulders when she realised the Maidens were there, almost hiding behind her mistress as she guided her to the sofa her sisters sat on. Acandrin and Maenvaere noticed her return but were too deep in conversation with Asmodean to bother helping. Rand wondered how they'd react if they knew exactly who they were chatting to so casually.

"There's a s-seat ... beside L-lady Rosaline," whispered the scarred maid.

Lili hesitated. "That will do." Her sister must have noticed, for her eyes were sharp on her.

"Who else is here?" Lili asked as she carefully sat down.

Hana sucked in a breath. One eye was hidden behind her fall of hair, but the other darted from Rand to Raine to the Maidens. A silence grew.

He took pity on her, and gave the answer himself. "Your sisters share the sofa with you, while my friend Raine sits with me. Several Aiel Maidens stand guard. I am Rand al'Thor, by the way. You can call me Rand."

"So kind. I am Lilivaere Damodred, but you may call me Lili."

"I'll ... go ..." Hana whispered.

Lili caught her hand before she could withdraw it. "You don't have to leave so quickly. My my, I'm afraid this really is a small sofa for the four of us but we could squeeze over. Would you like to take a seat?"

An energetic shaking of the head did about as much as he would have expected to deter the blind lady, who scootched over, obliging her younger sisters to do the same. She tugged the extremely shy Hana down beside her.

"Are there refreshments?" Lili asked.

"Y-yes ... tea ... a-and cakes," Hana said.

"Lovely. I always prefer to eat with someone else. Will you join us my ... Rand?"

He recalled Lan's warning. It seemed ridiculous to suspect these two of trying to poison him but who was to say they had prepared the snacks? He couldn't refuse outright, though. "Thank you, yes."

"Well now, how about some tea. Hana, could you please pour?" said Lili.

"I want some, too," Hidaile said. Rosaline observed all, and clicked her fingers loudly when she saw Hana start to pour, pointing at a spare cup.

Lili flinched. "Please do not do that."

Rosaline poked her little sister and looked a question at her.

Hidaile nodded. "Yes they heard."

"Even if it were loud enough to break the windows, I would ignore it," Lili said grimly. "I'm not a trained bear; I have that luxury."

"M-my Lord ... D-dragon ... would ... would you ... would you like ..."

"I would love some tea. Do you need a hand?" he said.

Hana looked shocked. "N-no, I'm fine ... Thank you ..." She accidentally clipped the teapot on a cup as she was pouring. Even that slight sound was enough to make her suck in a sharp breath. She actually quivered as she continued pouring.

Lili didn't need to see it to know. "It's okay, Hana. There's no need to be nervous."

Hana seemed to find some confidence in Lili's reassuringly soft-spoken words and deftly poured the next two cups. "Here you are, my Lord Dragon ... Lili." She carefully placed a cup and saucer in front of Lili and him.

"Thank you, Hana." Lili said, as though to a friend rather than a servant.

"Yes, thanks."

"Y-you're welcome."

He sat back and rested the cup on his thigh. Raine made to reach for one of her own but he caught her by the hand and held on. He could tell that Rosaline noticed, so searched for something to say.

"So how old are you all?"

"My my. How bold to ask a lady her age. I recently turned twenty, as it happens. Rosaline is eighteen and Hidaile eleven."

"And you, Hana?"

"My nameday is in ... D-Danu. I'll be twenty as well. What about ... yours?"

"Mine's in Danu as well. The date of the Battle of the Shining Walls. I'll only be nineteen, though. So I should thank you old ladies for seeing me fed and taken care of."

Hana flushed but Lili gave a surprised laugh. Their reaction to what she could not hear irritated Rosaline immensely.

"I'm glad to see you can take a joke, my lady. I hope my question didn't annoy you," he said.

She dipped her head graciously. "Quite the opposite, your curiosity is quite endearing."

Rosaline sat forward, trading her cup for her pen. Selecting a new sheet of paper, she began to write.

"Hmm. I recognise that sound. What is she up to now?" asked Lili.

"Leave me out of it," Hidaile said. Whatever "it" was, she got up and walked over to join her brothers rather than get involved. Hana's head was trying to sink between her shoulders.

Rosaline either didn't notice or didn't care. She pushed the paper at Rand as soon as she was done writing. His heart sank as he read it,

You aren't eating or drinking. Are you saying you don't trust us, and that we would pull something so disingenuous?

All three sisters and the maid had drunk from the same pot. Rand lifted his cup and took a long swallow, looking Rosaline in the eye as he did so. She reclaimed her paper and wrote some more.

It doesn't count if you do it after we did! I saw. You were worried we would poison you. My feelings demand an even greater apology now!

Odd. It was an embarrassing thing to be caught doing, but Rand found himself smiling instead of blushing. And after a moment, Rosaline's peaked brow vanished in a grin. But then, she was a Cairhienin after all.

Raine saw the message, too, and blinked at Rand in surprise. "We were?"

"Were what? Would someone mind telling me what is happening?" Lili asked.

"R-Rosaline was ... writing some of her m-messages," said Hana.

Rand looked back and forth between the sisters. He found them both to be a good bit more likeable than Moiraine had led him to believe her kin would be. Good company, and good to look at besides. It was a pity. A deaf queen or a blind queen would be at a significant disadvantage even at the best of times, and these were far from those. He had to be practical, mean as it might make him feel. Beyond even that, however, was the sheer twisted cruelty of the situation before him. The Shadow had to be touching the Pattern to make it impossible for two sisters to communicate without a third party.

Besides, picking any Damodred might be foolish, given their rivalry with House Riatin. Looking for a third option might be best, but since Elayne's whole claim came from her Damodred father, would she be that? Again he asked himself: if not her, then who?

He could say none of that out loud, of course. "I take it you are called on to read a lot of such messages, Hana."

"I ... Y-yes ... I d-don't mind ..."

"There is no need to lie on our account," Lili said. "Hana copes better than I now, but not by much. Rosaline is a harsh taskmistress no matter whom she deals with."

Rosaline wrote him another message. *What is she saying?* it read.

She handed him the pen, pointing insistently at the paper. Rand accepted it reluctantly. He ran through possibilities again, but none of them sounded good. Refusing to help them communicate would be cruel. Accurately reporting something that could be seen as insulting might start an argument. Editing either girl's words when they couldn't know it would be very inappropriate. Rosaline could be quite expressive when she wanted to be. Her annoyance at his lack of compliance was comically obvious. He set pen to paper, then showed her the results.

We were talking about who reads your messages out. She says you are quite the taskmistress.

She read his message, scowled, and started scribbling. *Ask her this: "Are you accusing me of slacking off? It seems like you're confusing me with yourself!"* she wrote.

Rand sighed. Even having seen it coming, here he was. "Rosaline wants to know if you are accusing her of slacking off," he said reluctantly. "She thinks you're confusing her ... I'm sorry to say ... with yourself."

Lili's lips thinned. "I see. Tell her this: I do not think so. That would be a very difficult thing for me to do; comparing myself to you."

"Could we perhaps ... not?"

"Well, you do not have to help me, I'm sure. I can cope alone."

He sighed again. "Fine. Fine." He wrote down what she'd said, word for word, and showed her sister. Her reaction was entirely predictable.

When he read her next message, Rand was ready to get up and go look for Moiraine. Surely she could save him from her nieces. He didn't leave, though. He just read it out in a flat voice. "She says you're right, the difference between you is like Light and Shadow."

"And it's not hard to guess which one she might represent!" Lili said angrily. "Tell her so."

"I really don't want to." After a moment, he sighed yet again. "But I will."

She says it's not hard to guess which one you might represent. And I say that this is the last message I'm passing between you today! I can see that you like to compete at things, but try to get along with your sister. You won't win anything by fighting her.

Rosaline didn't look too pleased by what she read, though this time it was him that her frown was directed at. She penned her response with care.

You're wrong. Because I don't want to be the slowest one in the room. Therefore, what's on the line is my confidence in my abilities, and the prize is the satisfaction of proving them.

Rand raised a brow at her over that. It was hard for him to imagine being that competitive. Or being around someone that competitive all the time. Perhaps that was why she and Lili had fallen out. The blind girl was waiting patiently for him to report her sister's next words.

"It looks like that was the last message for you," he said, then winced. "Uh ... damn. Sorry. It seems like."

Lili didn't appear to mind much his insensitive choice of words. Quite the opposite; she almost looked amused by his awkward attempt at an apology. "You are thoughtful, Rand, but judging from this encounter, I fear that it may get the better of you. There is no need to change your speech on my account."

"People try to take advantage," Raine confirmed, to his annoyance.

"Raine, wasn't it? You travel in illustrious company. May I ask who you are?" Lili said.

"Oh. I'm no-one special."

"I disagree," Rand said quietly. "Raine is a skilled scout and slayer of Shadowspawn. She has fought at my side in numerous battles."

Raine's freckled face blushed hot. Oddly enough, Hana blushed in response and the two entered into a strange little competition to see who could look the most embarrassed.

"Battles," Lili murmured, then raised her voice. "Rand, may I make a request?"

"Sure, go ahead."

"Would you mind if I were to quickly feel your face?"

Rand didn't need to turn around. He could feel the Maidens standing nearby turn to look at Aviendha. And feel her scowl on the back of his head, too. It would have had the opposite effect even if he'd questioned Lili's intent. The request made sense to him. How else would a blind person find out what something looked like?

"Uh ... no, go ahead. I don't mind."

The table between them made things even more awkward. He got up and moved to a nearer sofa. Hearing him do so, Lili sat forward and offered her raised hand in that direction. Poor Hana was trapped between them, eyes darting like a cornered animal's. The burns that could still be glimpsed past strands of dark hair went down that side of her neck as well, he noticed with the lone glimpse he allowed himself. Like Tuandha, the other side of her face was quite pretty.

While Rosaline watched with narrowed eyes, he guided Lili's hand to his face and then released her. Her nails were long and filed to sharpness, as most women's were. He hated that fearful little suspicion of everything and everyone that had infested him, and set about strangling it as Lili's gentle touch moved over his features.

Her skin was soft and her fingers long, but it was not with sensuality that she touched his cheeks and chin and nose. Or brushed his lips. Or briefly ran her fingers through his hair. He wondered if she could feel hot his face had gotten. As functional as the act was to her, it affected Rand in a different way, and had him tingling all over.

Satisfied, Lili sat back and folded her hands in her lap. "Thank you for letting me do that, Rand. And if I might add, I think you are quite handsome."

He heard Aviendha growl but refused to look. "But if you can't see, how ..."

"Just because I can't see, that doesn't mean I don't have my own preferences," Lili said with a small smile.

A hot-eyed Aviendha had joined Misha, Tuandha and Sulin in looming behind the sofa Raine sat on. She did not look pleased. Rand returned to his seat with supreme reluctance.

Aviendha put her mouth near his ear as soon as he sat down. She was going to say it again, he just knew it. "You belong to Elayne," she hissed. "Stop seducing other girls!"

For the Light's sake! He craned his neck so he could whisper back. "I don't belong to her or anyone. Also, to summarise, I drank a cup of tea with her, but only after checking to make sure she didn't poison it. Then I passed some mean messages between her and her sister. If that is what counts as seduction these days, I weep for the seducers of the past!"

Rosaline heard nothing, but saw a lot. She was writing again. When she was done, she pushed the paper towards him with a cat's smile.

Disgraceful! You accuse me of being too competitive, and then let my sister fondle you in public. Are you trying to trick me into doing something improper?

Any hope that Aviendha wasn't reading over his shoulder was crushed by her low growl. He gave Rosaline a dark look as he held out his hand for the pen. She gave it to him, plainly unmoved.

You know I'm not. Stop trying to start trouble!

She bounced silently again as she read. Then dipped her pen and wrote a response.

Oh, come on. It's just for fun, anyway! Between friends! It's about causing humiliation, suffering, and absolute despair! Isn't that the point?

He didn't bother writing anything, since he was sure his expression said it all. No! That's not the point at all? Why would that ever be the point!? Maybe Moiraine wasn't being unreasonable about them, after all. Where was she anyway? That meeting with her sisters was taking a long time.

The door opened but it was not Moiraine only Jovarin. He looked at Rand and nodded to himself in satisfaction. Over what?

"Is something wrong, Jovarin?" he asked.

He looked alarmed. "What? Jovarin? You are so disrespectful. Amazing. Are all delinquent types like this? Even the way you dress shows flippant disregard for authority. Andoran fashions in Cairhien. Disgraceful ..."

Rand's temper tried to flare. "Objecting to a lack of title is rather rich, when I outrank you so completely and have not heard you use my titles once."

"*Car'a'carn*? It's insulting that savages use the Old Tongue so. *Rie* is a title for civilised people."

"Would beating him, binding his arms, stripping him naked, and then strapping him in front of his sept until he wanted to die from the shame violate the *Car'a'carn*'s order against killing wetlanders?" asked Caitlin of Amindha, the former fully a head taller than Jovarin, and the other a mass of muscle.

"I do not think it would," Amindha said. The Maidens smiled as one.

A loud snap signified Rosaline's desire for attention. There was another message scrawled on her almost full sheet. *Rand, is he saying something insulting? Tell him not to insult my friends!*

"Don't insult my friends," he said.

Jovarin scowled at his daughter almost as much as at Rand. "Which one of you is talking?"

"Both of us. I agree with her."

Jovarin grunted loudly. "Why are you so rude, boy? Your attitude is not one that will make you a lot of friends."

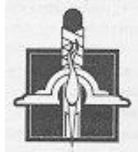
Rand surged to his feet, snatching *saidin* and his swordhilt both. Jovarin's sons, neither of whom was armed, paled further, while the Damodred servants, even Hana, looked as though they wanted to run. Rand stalked up to Jovarin, the top of whose head barely reached his chin. "No Cairhienin lord, raised on *Daes Dae'mar*, could be so utterly devoid of political sense. Why are you trying to distract me?"

"Distract? You are simply used to toadying, and cannot bear the truth. Look at yourself. An amoral, directionless delinquent, with a complete lack of etiquette and absolutely no fashion sense. You are tomorrow's Cairhien. Disgraceful. Is this the future of this once-great country?"

Rand wasn't buying it. He shoved Jovarin aside, easily sending him staggering into the arms of his eldest son. "*Far Dareis Mai*. Veil," he said as he jerked open the door and stalked out. They darted after him, Raine and Aviendha at their heels, with Asmodean trailing reluctantly.

"Do not be afraid," he heard Misha say as he left. "Only those who take up arms are in danger."

CHAPTER 9: *Blades*



There was no-one in the hall, down which Elana and Tenelca sprinted to get ahead of him.

"You should be among the clans," Aviendha said. "The Wise Ones said it, and you should have listened."

"I brought a clan."

"Near is not near enough if a spear finds your heart," she snapped. He could feel the goosebumps that meant she was holding *saidar*.

"I'll just have to trust you to prevent that from happening."

That silenced her in a way that shouting never would have. He saw no signs of the attack he feared in the entrance hall. Jecht was still there, however, and something happening beyond his window had drawn his focus. Rand peered past him. There were armed Cairhienin outside, speaking to the Damodred sentries while his own men looked on. No weapons had been drawn, though. There was no sign of Lan or Moiraine, but Caraline was descending the stairway in a hurry. Her eyes went wide for a moment when she saw him.

"Where is Moiraine?" he asked.

"She is still occupied."

He heard nothing upstairs. Outside, a Cairhienin lord was looking down his nose at the Damodred sentries.

"What of him?" Rand nodded toward the man, whose long dark coat had as many stripes as Caraline's dress. Very tall for a Cairhienin, perhaps less than a full head shorter than Rand, he was slender except for broad shoulders, and strikingly good-looking, with a strong chin and just a touch of grey at his dark temples.

Caraline joined him and peered out. "That," she breathed in a tight voice, "is Lord Toram Riatin himself. His eyes make me want to take a bath." She blinked, surprised at what she had said, but recovered quickly. Rand had the feeling little put Caraline Damodred off her stride for long. In that, she was very like Moiraine. "I would be careful were I you," she went on. "You may have wrought some miracle or *ta'veren*-work on me though I cannot say what it might come to—I make no promises—but Toram hates you with a passion."

"I'm getting used to being hated by people I've never met," Rand said.

"I have no idea what will come of today, but whatever it is, I think it would be best if you avoided Toram. I have told the guards to deny him entry."

For Rand's safety, she implied. Yet this man was as much a guest here as Rand, his guards fewer and less skilled. Even if Rand was not what he was, the danger would have come from Caraline and hers, not the brother of her rival, who she did not want him to speak to. Ignoring her, Rand opened the door himself and stepped out onto the manor house's veranda.

Caraline hastened after him, daring to slip between the Maidens and put her hand to Rand's chest. Slight as she was there was no way she could have physically forced him to halt, but the surprise of her trying had the same effect. Three sharpened spearheads hovered inches from the lady's back. If her hand had not been empty, he had no doubt she would be dead.

"This is your guest, Caraline?" said a deep, rich man's voice.

"I am the Dragon Reborn. It is well that you are here, it may save me a second such trip."

Izana stepped clear of the semicircle Rand's men had made around the entry. He bowed politely to the Cairhienin nobles, then notably lower to Rand. Drawing close, he spoke in a whisper. "He has only a few men with him, but spoke rudely of you earlier. Uno had to remind the Aiel of your words. Peace. I needed the reminder myself."

Rand nodded. It confirmed his assessment of Toram's strength. More importantly, it meant that Caraline had not been trying to manipulate him against her rival House.

Toram looked Rand over. He showed his teeth on seeing the heron engraved on the blade at Rand's hip. If it was a smile, it held no mirth. His own sheathed blade bore a heron, too. He displayed

it proudly. Toram's gaze fell to Caraline's hand, still on Rand's chest. "The Lady Caraline is to be my wife," he said lazily. "Did you know that?"

Caraline's cheeks reddened angrily. "Do not say that, Toram! I have told you I will not, and I will not!"

Toram smiled at Rand. "I think women never know their minds until you show them. What do you think, Jeral?"

A shorter, rounder man with markedly fewer stripes on his coat, nodded unctuously. "No-one shows them like you, my lord."

"It seems to me it is time for you to return to your sister, Toram. You may let her know I am of a mind to refuse her offer. Perhaps you can tell her her own mind while you are about it."

"Later, my precious." He tried to touch her cheek, and looked amused when she stepped back. Without a pause he transferred his amusement to Rand. And the sword at his side. "Would you care for a little sport, my so young Lord Dragon? With practice swords, of course."

"Certainly not," Caraline laughed. "He is a boy, Toram, and scarce knows one end of that thing from the other. My Aes Sedai cousin would never forgive me, if I allowed—"

"Sport," Rand said abruptly. "I might as well see where this leads. I agree."

Caraline, staring wide-eyed at Rand, did not know whether to groan or shout or sit down and cry. With a laugh, Toram began rubbing his hands together. "Listen, everyone," he shouted. "You are going to see some sport. Clear a space. Clear a space." He strode off, waving people away from the front of the veranda. The Cairhienin went as he bid, but every Aiel or Shienaran he waved at squared up to him instead. One-eyed Uno glared, and fingered the mace hanging at his waist as though he'd like to rearrange the lord's handsome face.

"I will spar with someone new today," Rand said. Only then did they move to make room.

"You are a fool, Rand al'Thor." Aviendha spoke without heat, as though simply stating a fact. "If anyone insulted Sorilea's honour as these wetlanders do yours, she would have them staked out over an anthill. Rhuarc would kill them without hesitation for half what they have said to you."

Asmodean chuckled. "Which is positively kind, compared to what some old acquaintances of mine would have done."

"The gleeman is right for once," Aviendha went on. "Have you listened to nothing I have taught you? Why would you honour an enemy so far beneath you by allowing him to face you alone? You are a fool."

"I would not put it quite so," Caraline said in a very dry voice, "but I suggest you leave, now. Or I very much fear that whatever might have come of today, never will. Toram is dangerous even without sharpened steel in his hand."

"The same could be said of most Aiel children," Rand said dryly.

Caraline was not amused. "Whatever ... tricks ... you think you might use—"

"I won't use any ... tricks." Rand interrupted. What Aviendha had said wasn't unreasonable. The barbs, intentional and otherwise, were getting irritating. He unbuckled his sword belt and handed his father's sword to Izana. "Keep this safe for me."

"I ... of course," he said, curiously impassioned.

Rand had no time to wonder at that. He turned to Caraline. "If I've touched you in one way, maybe I can touch Toram in another." The crowd was pushing back, opening up an area twenty paces across. Soldiers and common folk and lesser nobles were gathering to see what the commotion was. Some looked to Rand, and there was a great deal of rib nudging and sly laughter. The younger Damodreds had come to the doors and were edging past Lili, who stood arm in arm with Hana, head cocked quizzically. There was no sign of Jovarin or Maenvaere.

"Listen to me," Caraline's low voice almost crackled with urgency. She stood very close, her neck craned to look up at him. Barely reaching his chest, she seemed ready to box his ears. "If you use none of your special tricks," Caraline went on, "he can hurt you badly, even with practice swords, and he will. He has never liked another touching what he thinks is his, and he suspects every pretty young man who speaks to me of being my lover. When we were children, he pushed a friend—a friend!—down the stairs and broke his back because Derowin rode his pony without asking. Stop this. No-one will think less; no-one expects a boy to face a blademaker, whatever ornament he carries. Aiel ... whatever your name is ... help me convince him!"

“The *Car’a’carn* has given his word, Caraline Damodred. All we can do is try to pick up the pieces afterwards,” said Aviendha. “But your words do you honour,” she added reluctantly.

“Rand can beat him,” Izana said quietly. It was more heartening than Rand had expected. Honestly, Aviendha had watched him train often enough, and was an experienced fighter herself. Her lack of faith almost made him doubt himself.

Rosaline had brought her paper, ink and pen with her from the looks of it. She made poor Hana hold the pot and bend over a bit, that she might use her back as a table for her writing.

“Hana? What is wrong, why are you bending down like that?” Lili asked.

“R-Rosaline ... she w-wants ... to ... to ... write ...”

The blind girl’s colour rose. “You have my permission to slap her.”

Hana’s jaw dropped. “I couldn’t!”

“Then tell me where she is; I shall do it myself!”

Rand was no hero. He abandoned the horrified maid to her fate. Better than she should be stuck between them than him. Lili did not actually swing on her sister, perhaps for fear she might hit an innocent bystander. But the way Rosaline stepped clear once she was done suggested it wouldn’t have been completely out of character for her to try.

She held the otherwise blank sheet of paper up triumphantly, smiling and pointing to the already smearing ink. *The mark of great people is that they are daring, and that they can follow through! You’re already halfway there; isn’t that nice? Good luck with the second half!* it read.

Raine opened her mouth—and Rand laid a finger across her lips. “I am who I am,” he smiled. “And I don’t think I could run from him if I wasn’t. So, he’s a blademaster.” Unbuttoning his coat, he strode out into the cleared area.

“Why must they be so stubborn when you least wish it?” Caraline whispered in tones of frustration.

Toram had stripped to shirt and breeches, and carried two practice swords, their “blades” bundles of thin lathes tied together. He raised an eyebrow at the sight of Rand with his coat simply hanging open. “You will be confined in that.”

Rand shrugged out of his coat, and tossed it underhanded to Ayame. The Shienaran caught it and then immediately tossed it over his own shoulder, to keep his hands free in case this turned into something other than sport. His naked hostility and that of Rand’s Aiel did not move Toram at all. Whatever else he was, he was no coward.

Without warning, Toram tossed one of the swords; Rand caught it out of the air by the long hilt. “You want a firm grip,” he advised in a too-friendly way.

Rand took the hilt in both hands and turned slightly sideways, blade down and left foot forward. Toram spread his hands as if to say he had done all he could. “Well, at least he knows how to stand,” he laughed, and on the last word darted forward, practice sword streaking for Rand’s head with all his might behind it.

With a loud clack, bundled lathes met bundled lathes. Rand had moved nothing except his sword. For a moment, Toram stared at him, and Rand looked back calmly. Then they began to dance.

Lan had taught him that *The Swallow Takes Flight* was a good response to what Toram had tried, yet every time Rand had tried it on him he had dodged it. So he didn’t bother trying it here either. Wind and Rain gave Toram a series of attacks to parry but troubled him no more than Rand expected. The Cairhienin broke it with a downward slash, then launched into his own combination: *The Kingfisher Takes a Silverback*. Rand slipped aside and using *Reaping the Barley* to cut it short. That waist high slash put space between them, and the two men began to circle each other. Toram started moving his blade from hand to hand, switching his guard around, while smiling toothily. Deep within the void, Rand did not smile at learning his opponent had never learned the technique of divesting himself of emotion. He matched Toram’s movement, knowing that *The Creeper Embraces the Oak*, as that mocking encircling was known, would infuriate the man.

Toram attacked with a fury of overhand slashes, *The Boar Rushes Down the Mountain*. Their practice swords clacked loudly against each other again and again as Rand waited for the right moment. Thinking he saw it, he executed a classic *Stone Falls From the Cliff*, stepping into Toram’s off hand, turning the momentum of his spinning parry into a quick slash at his opponent’s back.

It didn't work. Toram counted with a graceful The Traitor's Smile, blade held underhanded at the small of his back, pointing upwards; he spun in place, batting Rand's practice sword aside and setting himself up for a slash at Rand's neck.

He backed swiftly out of range, of course, but any suspicion he might have harboured of Toram cheating his way to the heron was dispelled. The man knew his way around a sword. And now he knew that Rand did as well. So far neither of them had been touched.

The crowd was relatively silent, save for the constant susurrus of their whispered commentary. Hostile as these Cairhienin might be to Rand's invasion, they didn't quite dare cheer on the lord. Or perhaps he was even less popular than Rand. His own people were just as quiet, Aiel not being prone to needless noise.

The swordsmen went at it in earnest. The Grapevine Twines did not disarm Toram, nor did The Rose Unfolds strikes Rand's blade from his hands. The Boar Rushed Downhill to stop the Cat Dancing on the Wall, and from that rose The Tower of Time. Had that struck the soft flesh under Rand's jaw as intended, even the wooden blade might have proven deadly. Caraline had been right about this man.

The Damodred lady was gripping Izana's arm hard without taking her eyes from the contest. "He is also a blademaster," he heard her breathe. "He must be. Look at him!"

Izana was looking, and hugging Rand's sword belt and scabbarded blade as if they were him. Rand couldn't think about that, for Toram clearly wished his blade was steel now. Cold rage burned on his face, and he pressed harder, harder. Still no blade touched anything but another, yet now Rand backed away constantly, sword darting to defend, and Toram moved forward, attacking, eyes glittering with icy fury. Willow Embraces the Breeze was a hard defence to break. Toram would know that. What would he try? What would Rand? Toram was pushing hard. Overextending even. One moment, a heartbeat's break in his attack, that could be enough.

Dandelion in the Wind; excellent for weaving past a strong defence, but while on the run instead of planted? Bold. Arrogant. Counterable.

Despite the poetic name, Soft Rain at Sunset was merely a swift, one-handed slash at the head. It was enough to force Toram to defend himself, and buy Rand the heartbeat he needed to surge forward. Toram was imbalanced, forced to suddenly switch from full attack to full defence. He could probably manage it, if Rand didn't capitalise on this moment.

He launched into the Water Flows Downhill, his wooden blade whistling with each strike as he strained for speed and power. It was an expert version of The Boar Rushes Down the Mountain, but with footing and handwork varying erratically, making the angle of each attack hard to predict. Not many could execute the form without the constant shifting slowing them to an awkward, jerky, easily countered mess. Lan could. He'd "killed" Rand with it more times than he could count. Now Rand could.

He "killed" the blademaster Toram Riatin with it that day, in front of all those people.

Toram did not cry out when the wooden sword smacked his collarbone, just silently gritted his teeth against the pain. He froze in place, dark eyes bulging in surprise and outrage.

Rand stepped back, Folded the Fan, straightened. Seized *saidin* and waited.

They locked eyes, the greying man and the red-haired youth. Rand was distantly aware that he was breathing heavily. His side ached as though Toram had managed to hit him, worse than if he had, but wrapped in the void even that pain was distant, as though happening to someone else.

A distant stranger laughed softly within his mind. He refused that, as he refused the pain.

Toram's mouth worked. "I took you too lightly. You fight well for someone so young. I won't make that mistake again."

"We will not fight with blades, again," Rand said flatly. The reminder of who and what he was hung heavy in the air.

"Al'Thor," Toram spat. Hurling down his practice sword, he stalked to his discarded coat and calmly donned it.

"The Dragon Reborn. I want no further conflicts in Cairhien. Tell your sister I expect to have met her in the city by the end of next month."

"I will tell her," Toram said, red faced and reluctant, but he said it. He fastened his sword belt and searched the still quiet crowd. "Jeral? Where is my horse!" he shouted. "Jeral, the Light burn you, man, where are you? Jeral!"

"I saw your friend scurry off that way, Toram." Mouth twisted with distaste, Caraline gave a vague wave of her hand. "You will find him near the drink, I think, or else bothering the serving girls."

He stared at her for a moment, and then stalked off, whatever he had wanted to say going unsaid. His guards and companions went with him, in dead silence. With their departure it was as if a collective held breath was released. Excited chatter broke out all around.

Izana came and handed Rand back his swordbelt, smiling shyly. "Are you okay? He put up quite a fight there. But, Rand, that was awesome. You, looking like you were floating ... I knew you could do it."

"I'm glad someone did," Rand said dryly. Aviendha tossed her head, refusing to look at him.

None of the other Aiel looked very impressed either. Doubtless they would have preferred if he'd fought Toram with a spear, but Rand would have been more comfortable with the sword even if it hadn't been the weapon his father gave him. The Cairhienin seemed far more impressed by Toram's humbling, the Damodred ones at least.

"You are not what I imagined," Caraline said. "Where did you learn to do that?"

"From your cousin's Warder, for the most part." She backed away for some reason, blushing.

"I assumed it was just for show," Acandrin admitted easily. "Many queens inherit such swords, but no-one expects them to actually know how to use them."

House Damodred used to possess one itself. Rand hoped they weren't about to ask what had become of it. Aviendha was still avoiding his eyes. There didn't seem to be an attack coming, so he released *saidin* and let the void around him dissipate. Pain flared and he pressed a hand to his side.

"My my. That was certainly a lot of clacking. I take it from the reactions that your fight ended favourably. Congratulations," Lili said. Rosaline just smiled silently, spots of colour in her cheeks.

"I take it from the lack of injuries that yours never started. Nice to know you two can stop fighting for a while."

"You exaggerate. Though, while I assume the same of her, I cannot call my own views on the matter unbiased. Suffice to say, Rosaline and I were closer before than we are now."

While Acandrin allowed that that was relatively true, Raine padded closer, sniffing the air. She frowned at Rand, then set her hand on his. She tugged it away from his side and gasped.

"It's fine. It happens," he told her.

She didn't listen, of course. None of them did. The red stood out starkly on his white shirt, and once they saw it everyone started talking at once. Calls to get the Wise Ones, or get the Aes Sedai rang out. People demanded to know what was happening. Aiel ran for the gates, Izana ran for the manor house, only to be intercepted by Caraline herself, who said she would take care of it. Rand endured their fussing as best he could, telling himself that he was just tired from the fight, and that he didn't feel faint at all.

CHAPTER 10: Old Wounds



Aviendha grabbed two fistfuls of Rand's hair and held him still so she could search his eyes. He tried to free himself as gently as he could. "I'm alright," he told her. She did not look convinced. None of those who'd seen his blood did.

Even Lili, who could see nothing, was panicking. "Rand!? Hana, tell me what's going on! Hana, tell me!"

"The ... the ... he's bleeding ..." stammered the scarred maid.

"Did Lord Toram cut him?"

"He didn't even touch him," her brother Laman said, frowning at Rand as though at a puzzle.

Rand hated that look. The wound was his business and no-one else's. He didn't resist when Aviendha steered him towards the veranda steps and urged him to sit down, if only because it got him away from some of the stares.

Sulin had the Maidens form a protective semicircle around him, further shielding his privacy, though he doubted that was their intention. Prohibitions or no, Riallin was far from the only one who saw fit to "accidentally" stroll into Rand's room any time he was having a bath. It was for Aviendha's sake that Riallin had stopped her affair with Rand, and it was Aviendha who now ripped a strip off her *algode* blouse and wadded it up. She loosened Rand's shirt from his breeches and shoved her hand up to press the bandage to his wound.

He winced. "There's no need."

"Shut up! Why must you always make things so difficult? You are not allowed to die. Do you not see why!?" She was as upset as he'd ever seen her. The unshed tears in her eyes drove all thought from his mind.

"Die!?" Lili hastened over, careless of the risk of tripping. Hana, and even Rosaline, stepped quickly to take her by the elbows. "How bad is it?" she asked in a fearful whisper.

"Aviendha exaggerates. Been here before. Moiraine will fix it," Raine said. Uno and the others, who watched from afar, much as they'd watched from afar when he took the wound in the first place, nodded agreement.

Rand noticed Asmodean looking longingly at the gate through House Damodred's walls. He noticed the bitter twist of the Forsaken's mouth as well, when he calculated how far he was likely to get and how long he would last even if Rand's death freed him.

"Do you expect me to help?" he asked when he realised Rand was watching.

"No," Rand said quietly.

"We should have brought the Lost One," Sulin said just as quietly. Some of the Maidens looked horrified by that suggestion, but most nodded in agreement. Merile was back in Cairhien, though, with ... the Accepted whose name made Lews Therin act up all the time. It hadn't seemed necessary to risk her, not when Moiraine was there. Several of the Wise Ones among the following Goshien could Heal as well. No. No need for Merile. But it would have been nice to have her there now, and not just for the pleasure of her company.

Lili's flankers found her a seat on the steps near Rand, and the three sank down carefully. Hana was pressed against his uninjured side, but stretched her neck to see what Aviendha was doing. She flushed prettily when she noticed his noticing. Her scars were completely hidden from that angle, and he could only assume she must have been very popular with the boys before her injuries. It would be naive to think she still was. Rand certainly wouldn't have disdained her, but he'd long since come to accept that his own tastes and inclinations were more abnormal than he'd believed growing up.

"I don't understand what is happening," Lili said. "Were you attacked by someone else?"

"No. I just started bleeding a little."

Aviendha pressed her bandage against him harder, muttering and glaring.

"You make it sound as if you're hiding something ..." Lili said.

"I told you, it's nothing."

She furrowed her brow in disapproval. "Is that so?"

She made it sound as though he was lying! These Damodreds were a rude bunch. "Yes, it is."

"You are a very bad liar, Rand."

Aviendha turned her glare on the blind girl, insulted on Rand's behalf. "He is not lying, wetlander. He is simply a stubborn idiot."

"Thanks for coming to my rescue," Rand drawled. Rosaline pushed paper and pen on Hana, her eyes demanding the explanation her tongue could not. "Aviendha is partially right," he went on, "but not about that last bit! I'm a very trustworthy person." Until the madness took him.

"I'm sure you are. I think I can forgive you just this once, though," Lili said with a gentle smile. "All I ask is that you take care of yourself, Rand."

"Don't worry, I will."

"Promise?"

"Promise." After all, he always took care of himself.

Hana had finished penning her summary and passed it carefully to Rosaline, who read, and then practically lay on the front step of her house to write a response, careless of her fine dress. Once she was done, she picked it up and came to stand behind Hana. She rapped her knuckle on the maid's head to get her to move out of the way, which Hana did with no more than a little "Oh."

"You could be nicer to her you know?" Rand said without thinking. He suspected Rosaline would have rolled her eyes at him just the same even if she actually knew what he'd said. She got down on the ground again, and set the paper where Hana had been sitting, with the pen and inkpot nearby.

Where did you get this mysterious injury? Why won't you say? he read. Ignoring the pen, he crossed his arms and shook his head.

He followed Rosaline's words as she was writing them this time. *Okay! Then, we'll wait, and become better and better friends, and one day when you feel like it, you can tell us about it! After all, why wouldn't you hurt the feelings of young girls by distrusting them? I was born deaf, by the way.*

She was laying it on pretty thick. A knowing grin was all his narrow-eyed scowl won him.

He took her pen and jotted a brief rejoinder. *Were you born nosey, too?*

Rosaline opened her mouth in an exaggerated silent gasp. Taking the pen back, she wrote quickly. *What does that mean? When someone sees something interesting, their first instinct is to ask what it is, that's obvious. What's wrong with that? I saw how curious you were about Lili and Hana.*

Rand cleared his throat, abruptly reminded that Lili was sitting there, listening to the scratch of the pen with no way of knowing what was being "said". "Ah, Rosaline was asking about my wound and trying to make me explain," he said.

She nodded graciously. "It is an understandable question."

Rand grunted. What was keeping Moiraine? Usually she came running any time he was hurt. The wound wasn't bleeding much, but it wasn't stopping either. He supposed it was understandable why people would wonder.

"I got it from Ba'alzamon, when we fought at Falme." Wincing slightly, he took up Rosaline's pen and began writing what he was saying.

"T-the Dark One!?" Hana squeaked.

Rand shook his head quickly. "Not the Dark One, never that. It's just one of Ishamael's aliases. He leads ... or maybe led, the Shadow's forces in his master's absence. Anyway, we injured each other during our fight. Aes Sedai tried to Heal my wound afterwards but were only able to close it partially. Something about it denies the One Power. It breaks open sometimes, and it takes more Healing to make it stop bleeding."

"I am sorry, that sounds awful," Lili said. Hana just stared in silence.

Rosaline was scribbling furiously. Curious, he read as she wrote. *You must not sleep alone. Rand's brows tried to reach his hairline. That was a bit forward! Or be alone at all for long periods. What if you bled to death while no-one was around to realise? Disaster! Oh, that made a bit more sense. Unfortunately. He ground his teeth. What she said made tactical sense, but he had so little privacy left as it was. The thought of giving up even that made him want to punch something.*

Hana was rubbing her unburnt hand with her burnt one. She looked scared, so Rand tried to wipe the glare from his face.

Raine had noticed Rosaline's message. "I never thought of that," she breathed. "I wish I had a big brain like her." Rand was alarmed. He hoped she wasn't getting any ideas. He doubted he'd be able to escape Raine if he tried, what with her enhanced senses.

He'd calmed himself, but Hana still looked worried. "What's up, Hana? You look like a sheepdog on lookout."

"N-... it's nothing," she stammered, surprised to be addressed.

He tried a friendly smile. " 'Nothing' means 'something' when you say it like that."

She shuffled her feet, squirming in place as she struggled for words. "I ... I was in an accident."

"Accident? Just now? Are you all right?"

Hana shook her head, her hair flowing around her shoulders, the swaying wisps revealing the stark contrast between her pale, unblemished side and the dark, rough flesh the fire had left."

"N-no. In the w-war." He saw where she was going then, and was surprised. "When I ... when I was ..."

"It's alright, Hana, you don't have to tell me anything if you don't want to ..."

She shook her head again. "N-no. I want ... I have to tell you. I-if Lili allows it."

"I think she should tell them, dear. I am not ashamed of what happened, and you certainly should not be," Lili said warmly.

Hana took a deep breath. "A year ago ... I was in a fire. M-men attacked the house, tried to burn it down, and I nearly ... I nearly d-died. A-after that ..."

"Wait," Lili broke in. "Tell it properly."

"I ... I was ..."

Lili shook her head slowly, kindly. "We could not get out. Part of the roof caved in. The sparks ..." He had already become accustomed to her slow and dignified way of moving, such that the trembling hand she touched to her pale face took him aback. "They were the last thing I saw. I wish it had been something ... more beautiful."

Someone needed to hug that girl. Even with Aviendha there, Rand might have done it if he thought she would let him. Thankfully, Hana took care of the problem for him. The girls' eyes were wet. Rand wasn't sure his own weren't.

Lili hugged her back, in a way few ladies would hug a mere maid. "I could not get away. I ... fell ... I think I would have died there, but Hana got on top of me to shield me from the flames. I remember her clinging to me as she screamed. I don't know how we survived the fire, or the months that followed. It was a dark time for Cairhien, and for us."

"T-that's why ... why I'm all burned ... o-on one side," Hana said. She still looked and sounded fearful, but she was definitely not the coward that Rand had started to think her.

"It's okay, Hana," he said softly. "You don't have to keep going."

"B-but ... I have to ..."

He cocked his head. "Why? What brought this on?"

"You ... you told us about your wound ... A-and I ... I didn't think it was f-fair t-that I knew about you b-but you didn't know about me ..."

His lips curved in a wan smile. "So now, we both know a little more about each other. Thank you for telling me. I'll confess I was curious, but wouldn't have come right out and asked."

"You are thoughtful, as I said. I imagine that the first thing most people ask her about is her scars, and what happened," said Lili.

Hana hunched her shoulders. "T-thank you, my L-lord Dragon. I ... I haven't told many people about this."

"I can understand that. I don't like to tell people about my ... circumstances either."

That won him a shy smile. "T-then I won't tell a-anyone."

Aviendha growled furiously. He thought she would rebuke him for supposedly flirting with girls again. Which he had not been. He was just chatting. Making friends perhaps. Their being attractive was beside the point. Most people were attractive! But it wasn't him she was mad at for once. "Go find the Aes Sedai, Raine Cinclare! She should be here by now! Misha, hold this." She waited only long enough for the young Maiden to take charge of the bandage before standing. Her hand was coated in blood, more than he would have expected. It was ... a little frightening. His work was far from done. "I do not have the Talent to make it work, but ... Light burn me, I will *make* it work!" An

additional chill pebbled Rand's flesh as Aviendha prepared to channel at him. A defensive instinct made him snatch at and seize *saidin*. It made the pain worse, and the strange voice that spoke louder.

"It is almost offensive for a wilder to possess such strength." The speaker was tall for a woman, thin. Not pretty.

"It is," confirmed a shorter woman possessed of all the beauty the former lacked, as she followed her out of the Damodred manor house. Proud amber eyes assessed and dismissed Aviendha. "But strength is nothing without skill and intelligence. It is well that I have all three."

The third woman's hair was paler than the others', as were her eyes, but she was a match for them in other ways. In her arrogance, in her red dress, and in her ageless face.

There was no need for Raine to go find the Aes Sedai. The Aes Sedai had come, just not the ones he'd been hoping for. The last ones he would have hoped for.

CHAPTER 11: Hidden Figures



Rand wasn't sure if his dizziness was due to loss of blood or the feel of an imaginary noose closing around his neck. Where was Moiraine? Had they hurt her? The betrayal he might once have feared from her he no longer entertained as possible. The betrayal of her fellow Cairhienin, however ...

His guards were outnumbered, within the enemy walls and separated from his main force. And neither the Shienarans nor the Aiel were inclined to take up arms against Aes Sedai. No veils had been raised, not even by the Maidens. Moiraine's nephews looked wary, and stepped clear of him and the Aes Sedai alike, but there was recognition there. They had known these women were inside.

As Acandrin seized his youngest sister by the hand and dragged her back into the manor house, Rand tensed, suddenly acutely aware that Lili and Rosaline were sitting within touching distance. If either girl had stabbed at him while he was staring at the Red sisters, it would have been the end. Were they in on it? What was there to be in on?

He needed Aviendha's arm to haul himself to his feet and clear of the Damodred girls. He accepted that shame, in no small part because it brought him close enough to whisper to her. "Are you shielded?"

Her lips barely moved. "No."

Two against three, then. Assuming Rand didn't pass out. Three against three, if Asmodean took part. It might well be better to lose than to let him. He was watching the Aes Sedai out of the corner of his eye, safely hidden within the crowd. There wasn't much he could do while under the effect of Lanfear's shield, but anything he did do the Aes Sedai would be completely unable to detect.

The prettiest of the Aes Sedai smiled smugly. "The Dragon Reborn. My lucky day."

"What do you want?" he asked while keeping a tight grip on the wadded cloth against his side.

"In my country, we exchange a pleasant hello before asking questions." She could have passed for Cairhienin, save that her skin was slightly darker than normal and her eyes slightly lighter, but he knew from her accent that she didn't mean here. "Are you as uncivilized as rumoured, then?"

"Hello. You know my name. What is yours and what do you want?" he said, unsmiling.

"I am Azula Sedai of the Red Ajah. I wanted to speak with Eleiza and her friends, lately arrived from Tear. But now ..." She smiled. It was not friendly. "We have been presented with an extraordinary opportunity, sisters."

"Indeed. Welcome, Master al'Thor," said the yellow-haired one, slender and attractive with cold blue eyes; Eleiza, presumably. "Come inside. We should speak. Your friends can wait out here. It would not do to presume on Lady Caraline's hospitality."

Inside. Where Jovarin had wanted him to stay. "I don't think so. What have you done to Moiraine? She would not send strange Aes Sedai to speak to me in her stead, especially not Red Ajah."

"How disgracefully rude," Eleiza said. "You speak to and of Aes Sedai without the honorific? Have you no shame, boy? It is plain she has been far too lax with you. I see you now as one who disturbs the natural order."

"Disturbed; past tense. He will be coming with us now," Azula said.

Sulin barked a command, and a dozen Maidens formed a spearwall between Rand and the Aes Sedai. None of them had veiled, though. Even back before Winternight Rand might have been able to guess the reason for that. He couldn't blame them since he could not harm a woman either.

Yet, after a moment, Sulin slowly raised her black veil, covering all except a small strip of flesh and the hard blue eyes that peered out. A Maiden gasped, but when Sulin's fingers flickered a silent order, all dozen women raised their veils.

"What is happening?" Lili asked tensely.

"It seems the young Dragon thinks he can defy the White Tower. And since you can't see, I should tell you I'm rolling my eyes," Azula said, honestly.

"Be quiet, Lilivaere," Caraline said. She had come to the door of her manor house, without her cousin. She coloured slightly at his accusatory scowl, but stood her ground.

"You appear to be hurt, allow me to heal you," Eleiza said. Her ageless face was etched with concern over his bloodied shirt.

The distant awareness of Alanna her unwelcome bond constantly afforded him, often relegated to the back of his mind, now felt much stronger. She was still to the south, far from him; and long might she stay there. "I don't think so."

She sighed tolerantly. "You are young, and the young are often unwise. And you are male, so ... It is only to be expected. Listen to me. You require Aes Sedai Healing, as soon as possible. Tell your savages to step aside. We will move them if we must."

"All bow before the Tower's will in the end. You will, too, girl," the lanky one told Aviendha. "Strength such as yours belongs to the Tower."

"Priorities, Barasine," said Azula. Arrogant as this Barasine was, she fell silent under her fellow Red's hard stare.

Aviendha pulled Rand close. He thought she was seeking his protection at first, but she spoke under her breath once more. "Delay them."

For what? "How did you know which direction I would approach from when you were setting your trap?" he asked Caraline.

"There was no trap," she said. "Not of my making anyway." Uncertainty showed in the way she watched the Aes Sedai. After, all, who knew what impossibilities they were capable of?

Azula smiled cynically. "All of life is a trap. Only the witless think otherwise."

"Lady Caraline knows, as we do, that you do not belong in Cairhien," Eleiza said. "A foreigner ruling here could be perceived as a threat by other nations. Even if it is just idle whim for you, it is not so for others. Your actions affect more than yourself. You must tread carefully if you are truly concerned. And ... for your sake, I have another piece of advice. You seem to have gathered many peoples to you ... but I think it would be best if you stopped now. Crossing the borders and mixing with others not of your kind is not necessarily right ... Don't you think so?"

Send the Aiel back over the Dragonwall, in other words. Moiraine had said much the same once, if in different words. She hadn't gone on about that since becoming his lover. If they had hurt her, he ...! He'd what? They were women. "Bring Moiraine out," he grated. "Unharmd. Or I'm going in there to find her. Through you if I have to."

Bold words, but his legs felt weak and it was becoming hard to hold on to the Source. He clung to it for dear life. It felt like squeezing clumps of rotting food between his hands but he did not dare stop. He could only hope the Aes Sedai didn't notice his weaknesses, or thought him mad enough to actually strike them down.

He hoped in vain.

Azula laughed lightly. "Don't flatter yourself. It's over. You're tired and you have no place to go. You can run, but I'll catch you."

Rand set his jaw. "I'm not running."

Her smirk only grew. "Do you really want to fight me?"

"I want you to leave."

A flickering flame appeared above the Aes Sedai's palm, casting her beautiful face in a sinister light. "I'm not going anywhere."

* * *

Moiraine had been calm throughout the questioning, and remained calm now that she was alone with Saxana. A plump Ghealdanin, she had the colouring that they often shared with Theren folk, and disturbingly sunken eyes. Alone she would not have been able to shield Moiraine, but she was perfectly capable of maintaining the shield that had been placed on her.

She had heard the message Caraline brought. Rand was bleeding. He needed Healing. The other Red sisters had left to see to him. He needed her. She remained calm.

"What happened in Tear?" Saxana asked. "We were told there were prisoners in need of escorting to Tar Valon."

Moiraine had already told them that she owed them no answers and would give none besides. It was undeniably true in this case. Saxana had been Aes Sedai when Moiraine's grandmother was young, but that counted for little in the face of her strength. Azula, however ... Before the advent of

Elayne and Nynaeve, that one had been the strongest recruit the White Tower had seen in centuries. She had had to invoke Sivan's name to justify it to them, and to herself. What the Red had told her of her oldest friend's fall had strained Moiraine's composure far more than the threat to put her to a true questioning.

What had happened to the Black Ajah in Tear might well have been worth all this by itself in normal circumstances. These were not those. All their questions had revolved around Rand. Everything did, it sometimes seemed. Ever since she had overheard Gitara Moroso's last Foretelling, Moiraine's whole life had come to be centred on that boy. She hoped he was okay.

The pains they had inflicted on her had been mild thus far. The added indignity of her kinswomen's disinterest had been a mild one also, due to her low expectations of them. Innloine and Anvaere had already been dismissed by the Reds when Caraline arrived with her news of the situation outside the manor house.

And now, at last, they were alone. She felt Lan exit the side room he'd taken refuge in. He was outside in the corridor now, moving with a silence that she had once thought shocking from a man his size. The Red was the only Ajah that did not bond Warders. They disdained them. It was one of the many ways in which they were fools.

Saxana had claimed the large, cushioned chair behind Lady Caraline's desk once Azula vacated it. She was facing Moiraine, and also the doorway directly behind her. It was time she broke her silence.

"If you were one of the sisters sent to Tear, you cannot have been involved in the coup at the Tower," she said, rising from the small wooden chair they had given her. There had been no need to tie her up, of course. They were channelers.

"Coup? An ugly word, and inaccurate. The letter of the law was followed."

Moiraine sniffed. She went to the window and looked out, past the fresh flowers in their case of Sea Folk porcelain. "The letter of the law and the spirit of the law are not always the same. Just as words can be true without being truthful. We are both Aes Sedai, after all, and know that well."

Saxana chuckled. Even when smiling she had a sinister appearance. She had not moved from the chair. Something even more untoward was needed.

"Why were you so concerned over the deaths of the Black Ajah? Were they acquaintances of yours?" she asked mildly.

Saxana turned a hard-eyed glare on her, still glowing with *saidar*. "Do you imply—" she began, her angry words drowning out the sound of the door latch clicking open. Lan eased in quietly, and the arm with which he led held a knife. Moiraine saw it only out of her peripheral vision, and was confident her eyes did not betray them, but somehow Saxana knew anyway. Her head swivelled. Lan's arm rose. It would be too late; swift as he was, a trained channeler could weave as fast as thought.

The vase smashed against the back of Saxana's head, glass and water and torn petals becoming a sudden destructive bloom. The Red's eyes briefly closed in pain. Swiftly reversing his grip, Lan let fly. His knife struck Saxana hilt first on the bridge of her nose and sent red blood spraying onto her red dress. He was already running. Setting a hand on the table, he vaulted over, one booted foot swinging around and catching her across the face. She went down in a flurry. Before her skirts had even settled, he was standing over her, his fist raised and ready to hammer down if she showed signs of trying to rise.

Moiraine knew she would not, for the glow was gone. Saxana had lost *saidar* along with consciousness when Lan's boot connected with her jaw. She opened herself to the Source and allowed its warmth to fill her once more.

"Well done," she said, not even bothering to hide her relief. "And thank you."

"The other three went downstairs," he said.

"Then we must hurry!"

* * *

Rand spun and maintained a shield, lamenting for the umpteenth time his inability to see *saidar*. It had been one of the things he'd been thinking about asking for, before Moiraine denied him the use of that doorway to the land of the snakes and foxes. Mat's wishes hadn't worked too well there, and it didn't

look like Rand's were going to here. Delay, Aviendha had said. For what? He needed to shield these women before he passed out. Delay.

Azula and the other two were intent on him, so when the fiery Red pointed at him he was ready. Or so he thought. Aviendha sucked in a surprised breath. The fierce concentration on her face lasted only a moment, before she stop a step backwards, her eyes widening.

Azula didn't even smile. "You see? Strength is nothing without skill and wit. You were not even a challenge."

Aviendha flushed. "She has me shielded, Rand al'Thor," she admitted.

He grunted, wove the threads, slashed. Azula's dark brow rose in surprise, and Aviendha gave her reluctant thanks for being freed.

"You like shields? Try these ones," he said, raising his unbloodied hand.

"Wait! There is to be no fighting," Caraline cried. "You said you wanted no more fighting!"

"Be silent when your betters speak!" snapped Azula.

"What I want and what the Wheel wills are rarely the same," said Rand. He struck at the quietest of the Aes Sedai first, thinking she'd be the least prepared. Sure enough, he was able to push a block between her and the rush of *saidar* flowing into her, but her fellow Aes Sedai knew at once and lashed out, destroying his shield and bringing her right back into the fight.

And fight it was now. Raine was one of the many quietly circling around behind the Aes Sedai, rightly thinking they'd have a better chance if they attacked from behind. Uno stood with Rand and looked poleaxed as he muttered a stream of curses to himself.

"Masema might have been right about them," he heard Izana whisper.

There was a commotion at the distant gates as well, men shouting, metal slamming against stone. One of the Damodred guards, a scarred and greying man with the insignia of a captain, relayed the news. "Aiel at the gate, Lady Caraline!"

"Order your men to seal it at once," Eleiza commanded.

"How?" Rand asked quietly, while Caraline divided her stare between him and the Red sisters.

"I sent spears to raise the armcry as soon as those Aes Sedai came out of this poor excuse for a hold," said Aviendha.

"Be nice if you'd asked first," he muttered churlishly. He probably should have done it himself, if he was honest, but he hated asking others to fight his battles.

Aviendha looked perplexed. "Why would I do that? Fool wetlander."

"Be quick about it, Caraline!" said Eleiza.

"I can tell them," the guard captain said, eager to comply yet uncertain in the face of his mistress' hesitation. Obviously a veteran, his men looked to him and waited.

The Damodred lady was still staring silently. At him, at the Aes Sedai, Rand, and finally at her nieces as they clung silently to each other, their enmity set aside in the face of imminent violence. She swallowed visibly. "Let them in. They are the Lord Dragon's guests, as he is mine. Kindly put a stop to these inappropriate threats, Azula Sedai. I would not have guests harm each other."

The Aes Sedai's anger was such that her amber eyes almost glowed like heated gold. "How inept. You remind me of Galldria Riatin. She, too, scorned my counsel. Who rules Riatin now? You! Guardsman! Order your men to seal the gateway. The White Tower commands it."

The captain looked torn. If he gave the order, the slender hope Caraline had offered might snap like a dried twig. Rand struck, but not at him or the Aes Sedai.

There were sentries on the wall. He reached out his hand and long fingers of Air tugged them backwards. Invisible nets of the same broke their falls. There was nothing but stone, nothing but Earth. Even in his weakened state, it was easy. The entire length of wall on this side of the gate crumbled to dust as though it aged a millennia in a moment. Many of those gathered gasped, even some Aiel.

Not the Aes Sedai. The dark, billowing cloud that had been a wall occasioned only a brief glance from them before they returned their focus to Rand.

"Since you know how easily stone can be broken, you must know how easier it is to break men," Azula said. "If you have any care for your pets, you will advise them against threatening us."

Figures appeared in the cloud, hundreds of them, dark brown shapes on lighter. A long line of them, marching through the darkness. He could see no faces, hear no voices, but that familiar beat of spear against buckler heralded the Goshien's arrival.

“Not just men,” Rand said. “There are hundreds of women like Aviendha here among that army. That healing you offered? I’ll get it from them.”

Aviendha nodded. “The Wise Ones will tend the *Car’a’carn*’s wounds. You are not needed, Aes Sedai.”

Azula sneered. “Wise Ones. How primitive.”

“They are more knowledgeable than you realise, sister,” a cool, chiming voice said.

Caraline jumped when Moiraine stepped from behind her. Lan took station on the lady’s other side, his face matching the sudden blankness of the Red sisters’.

“In addition to being more numerous,” Moiraine went on. “Perhaps you four should move on. It is a long journey to Tar Valon.”

“Where is Saxana?” asked Barasine.

“She is sleeping,” Moiraine said calmly. “I can have her brought to meet you at the stables.”

Azula was turning on the spot. She didn’t look pleased with what she was seeing, but she didn’t look scared either. “Well, look at this. Enemies and traitors, all working together. I’m done. I know when I’m beaten. You got me. An Aes Sedai surrenders with honour.”

Eleiza nodded once. “We will leave.” Rand tried to stand straighter when she looked him over, and tried to tell himself that it wasn’t relief that made him feel so faint. “I do not believe you to be a fool, Rand al’Thor. Pray that we do not meet again.”

The dust was settling, revealing *shoufa* clad men and women, veiled and armed. Behind them came the Wise Ones in their pale blouses and dark skirts. Azula took in their numbers and knew Rand had not lied. She calmly turned and walked away, the other two falling into place behind her.

Moiraine looked Rand over, too, and he saw her concern, but she waited until the other Aes Sedai had passed out of sight around the corner of the manor house before snatching her skirts and running towards him. As soon as she set her hand to his chest, he jerked upright, an ice-cold surge of power closing his wound once more and purging him of any other injuries. The moment felt longer than it was.

“You have lost a lot of blood,” she said as took his lax arm and draped it across her shoulders. She was much too short and slender to carry his weight but it was a struggle not to lean on her.

“I’ll be fine,” he said, taking deep breaths.

Moiraine shook her head to herself. “Help me get him inside.”

Quick strides brought Lan to his side but he did not offer his shoulder yet. “Walk fast, shepherd,” he said in a low voice. “She is right, but there are eyes.”

And a man, especially one who presumed to lead, should not be seen clinging to others for support. Rand nodded and made for the doors. He spared only enough time for a waved greeting to Bael and Melaine, who emerged from the throng of Goshien, before stepping into the Damodred manor house and finding a wall to lean against.

He did not go alone, of course. Uno and the other Shienarans went to have words with that Damodred guard captain, but Izana invited himself along, as did Raine and Aviendha. Aiel, male and female this time, crowded past to search the manor house more thoroughly, their cold eyes alarming Caraline, who looked as though she might be missing that Aes Sedai support already. Lan had a quiet word with Laman, who eagerly left Rand’s company, calling for servants to assist him. The sleeping Aes Sedai, Rand assumed. He wondered briefly how Moiraine had freed herself but dismissed it. She had always been full of surprises, and his head was trying to float away.

“A most regrettable confrontation,” Caraline said. “Grace favours us that it was resolved without bloodshed.” She strove for poise under those myriad glares, even while finding herself outnumbered in her own home. “I hope you do not still suspect me of engineering this situation, my Lord Dragon. An Aes Sedai visit is not something one can refuse.”

“I do not,” Rand allowed. He blinked slowly, glad his head had not floated away completely yet. “Thank you for siding with me against them. I certainly hold no grudge against you for any of this.”

Moiraine, hovering near, flicked him a look of blank-faced approval. “He will require water, and a lot of it, as well as a place to rest,” she said before Caraline could respond. That was in keeping with what she had taught him. Make the moment final, she’d once said. Leave it carved in their mind as though in stone, and leave them no time for rebuttal.

Lili was picking her way inside, flanked by an excited Rosaline and a wary Hana. “You heard, Moiraine Sedai. A pitcher and a cup, as quick as you can,” Caraline told the maid.

Hana hesitated briefly, perhaps reluctant to leave Lili in Rosaline’s care, but soon scuttled off.

Rand left the lady there and tottered off in search of somewhere to rest. Not knowing where else to go, he returned to the sitting room with its four sofas. He sank down on the nearest. He felt like he could sleep there and then but didn’t dare. “The Aes Sedai?”

“I saw Bael send spears to shadow them. If they turn back, we will know,” Sulin said.

“Well. It seems to have worked out,” he sighed. Caraline would swear the oaths, which left only Riatin in contention for the throne. It would be a surprise if Ailil didn’t do as he’d told her brother to request.

It was a smaller group that had accompanied him now, all of them proven loyalists. That being so, Moiraine gave her tongue free reign. “Through luck more than intention. This was sloppily done, Rand. There is nothing noble or wise about moving from a position of strength to one of weakness. You win no tearful regard for that. All you are doing is inviting a rival to take advantage of your foolishness. All you are winning is scorn, from them and from those who relied on you. Learn from this mistake, and do not make it again.”

He sighed. “I hear you.” He could have remained among the Goshien and invited Caraline out to meet him. Small chance of an ambush, deliberate or otherwise, then.

A knock on the door heralded Hana’s arrival. She was carrying a silver tray on which rested the promised pitcher and cup. The Aiel let her pass, though Tuandha still looked hostile despite the heroic story she had overheard. Rand could not wonder at that. His body cried out at the sight of the water.

Riallin snatched the cup away from his outstretched hand. She took the pitcher, too, and poured herself. For herself, it turned out. Rand frowned. She was a bit plump by Aiel standards, which meant she was anything but plump by everyone else’s, but he doubted it was greed that drove her. She drank to test for poison. He stirred on his seat, outraged. How dare she risk herself like that! If it had been poisoned then she ... then ... Then Moiraine was right there to Heal her. He settled down and waited in sour silence for her to pronounce the water safe and pass him a cup.

“You must not risk yourself,” she told him quietly, kindly, as she did so.

Rand drank in silence. That, and the next cup, and the next. Even that was not enough to quench his thirst.

“I ... can bring more t-to your, your room,” Hana said. “Lady Caraline said to put you in the, the b-best g-guest room.”

He had not planned to stay the night here, but the thought of hauling himself onto a saddle, or mustering the strength to Travel, held no appeal at all. “Thank her for me.” The water had helped but his head was still swimming. “Are you coming with me?”

Hana instantly blossomed into full blush. “No ... I ... not ... this room ... isn’t ...”

He blinked. Blood and ashes, she thought he was propositioning her. In front of all those people, shy as she was. He would never have been so cruel. “I meant as an esc—as a ... guide? Never mind, I’m sure I can find my own way.”

She looked almost insultingly relieved. “Oh ... okay ... good night ...”

Sulin rolled her eyes at that nonsense. “Show us this room, girl,” she said. Hana gulped, but silently led a group of Aiel off even so.

Aviendha was not among the group that went ahead. She stood here, arms crossed, staring at Rand in that flat, accusing way she’d perfected.

He sighed. “I swear I was not doing anything of the sort.” She just kept staring. It took more effort than he liked to drag himself off the sofa. “Where is this room she spoke of?”

“I expect it has not changed since my day. I shall show you,” said Moiraine.

They left arm in arm, but at least Rand didn’t feel like he might have to lean on her this time. Izana excused himself quickly, and Lan accompanied them only part of the way. They had never really spoken of Rand’s relationship with Moiraine, not since just after it started. He didn’t seem as angry over it now, though. Perhaps they should talk it out someday. Not this evening, however. This evening was for sleeping.

He knew the room Moiraine was steering him towards by the Aiel emerging past its fancily carved wooden door. He knew one of them, a friendly young Taardad named Zell who held the door open for Moiraine to enter and bowed politely as she passed.

"We checked everything, Rand al'Thor. *Rahien Sorei* will stand watch outside the window." That was his warrior society.

"At least it won't be inside," he said, sounding as dry as he felt.

Zell shook his head and lowered his voice. "We would not. I am sure you want to be alone with her," he said, nodding at Moiraine's slender back. "So, Rand ... I never thought you were the roma ... Ah, you know..."

"You don't ... Never mind." Rand sighed to himself. He was far from indifferent to thoughts of romance, Light help him. It was a surprise that people thought otherwise, but perhaps it was understandable. Being openly involved with so many people ... It was only natural that he get a reputation as a philanderer. Callow. Uncaring. And perhaps it was for the best. If his enemies thought he did not care, then he could hope that they would not think to use his loved ones against him. "I'm not. Good night," he said.

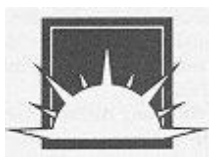
Raine and Aviendha were right there. It hurt to say it in front of them, but neither objected. Aviendha just folded up against the wall nearby, legs crossed and face expressionless. Raine sank down on the other side of the doorway. After a moment, she crossed her legs in imitation of the bigger Aiel woman.

"You do not have to stay here, Raine Cinclare," Aviendha said.

The wolfsister gave a little shrug. "I'll defend Rand's door with you." After a long expressionless stare, Aviendha gave her a single nod.

Rand was too tired to argue. Or to do what Zell imagined he intended. He tottered into the room and closed the door behind him.

CHAPTER 12: Home Coming



Rand woke with the dawn in an unfamiliar bed. It took him only a moment to recognise the Damodred guest room and the woman sleeping beside him. Moiraine looked younger cuddled up under the dark covers, her pale shoulders peeking over her nightdress. Temptation struck but Rand was too hungry and thirsty to listen.

He slid quietly from the bed and recovered his breeches and stockings from the ground. Moiraine slept on, he was glad to see. He would have felt guilty for disturbing her. The shirt he dropped after a single look. He wasn't walking around in something that filthy. Ayame still had his coat so far as he knew, so Rand left the room wearing only the breeches and stockings. It was not as if he could hide the wound anymore.

The guilt he'd thought to avoid found him at once. Raine was sleeping on the floor, curled up in a ball near his door. He hadn't been thinking clearly, to leave her there. Aviendha's eyes were closed as well, and her chin touched her chest, but her head snapped up and her eyes opened as soon as he emerged. She released the belt knife she'd grasped and pushed herself to her feet. Her beautiful blue-green eyes were bleary and bloodshot.

"You are well?" she asked.

"Better than you," he said quietly. "Sorry."

Rand crouched down and got his arms under Raine's shoulders and knees. Golden slits peered at him briefly and she grumbled something unintelligible, but that was the limit of her response. Rand carried her silently into the room and gently deposited her beside Moiraine on the bed.

Aviendha was speaking quietly to the Maidens when he returned. "Kitchen?" he asked.

She looked at him with strained tolerance. "The Maidens will show you. Do not go anywhere without them."

He felt too guilty to argue, little as he liked her ordering him around. She walked off, her proud shoulders slumping slightly, in search, he had no doubt, of a tent to lie down in.

Rand went the other way, stomach rumbling.

The cavernous kitchen was already bustling at that hour. The arrival of so many armed Aiel and a half-naked Rand was understandably alarming for the servants but his reassurance seemed to work. That or they decided they just didn't have any say in their fates. Either way, they returned to their tasks pretty quickly. The only person he recognised was Rosaline, sitting over a plate of bread and cheese at the huge central table.

She was surprised to see him, too. A loud click of her fingers won her the servants' attention, and when she mimed the act of writing a young man set aside the vegetables he was cutting and went to get what she wanted.

Rand stole one of their cups and poured for himself from the pitcher Rosaline had been using. He matched her knowing smile with one of his own. Another few clicks from her won him a plate of breakfast to go with it. He drank deep and ate with a will.

He froze with a mouth full of bread and cheese when she touched his forearm. There were spots of colour in her cheeks, but she was not so embarrassed that she refrained from brushing her fingers across the metallic-looking tattoo of a Dragon that coiled around his arm, the head resting on the back of his hand. Rand dismissed his surprise, along with the way her touch made him shiver. He'd gotten so used to them that he sometimes forgot they were there, but he supposed the tattoos would be pretty eye-catching the first time you saw them. They glittered like a bracelet but were part of the skin.

He was half done with his meal when the servant returned with the predictable inkpot, pen and sheaf of papers. Rosaline took them from him perfunctorily, dusted her hands and began to write.

She was a bright and clever girl, but he thought she could stand to have a bit of her sister Lili's kindness and grace. It was a pity really. If you could combine all their best traits, you might well have the perfect queen. Not to mention one that could both see and hear.

Caraline would have been a good option, too, in some ways. In others, not so much. He and Moiraine had spoken of it in bed last night, in the brief minutes before Rand passed out. The Aes Sedai had not tortured her as he'd feared, but they had struck her with the One Power to try to jar loose some answers. Caraline, Innloine and Anvaere had seen it done, and none of them had objected.

Rosaline finished her writing and sat back. He leaned over to see what she'd written. *You are here very early; most people sleep in late. That means you are abnormal.*

He failed to see why she'd needed to add that last bit. Taking up the pen he scribbled a note of his own. *You're here. Wouldn't that make you abnormal, too?*

She smiled to herself as she wrote, and kept smiling as she watched him read the results. *Are you implying that you thought me normal? Why, that is the sweetest thing anyone has ever said to me!*

Rand snorted to himself. He supposed she'd gotten him there. He wrote with one hand while eating with the other. *I'm glad to see you're still in a good mood. I thought you might be upset over my villainy, since I nearly wrecked your home yesterday.*

She frowned, then wrote. *What do you mean? It didn't look like you were attacking.*

He took up the pen, but she snatched it from his hand at once and scribbled an addendum. *Except with Lord Toram. You attacked him properly! You should have taken your shirt off as well when you were doing it.*

Rand coloured when he read that last bit. A shy glance at Rosaline found her eyeing his torso. Her smile was ... feline. He cleared his throat, very glad that Aviendha wasn't around. All his efforts at diplomacy would have been wasted if she started dragging Lady Caraline's kinswoman through the halls by her hair.

He took her pen but then just sat there for a while, wondering what he could write. *I doubt my being topless would have stopped the Aes Sedai. They wanted me to stop what I was doing and come away to Tar Valon with them. I refused, hence the confrontation.*

Rosaline pouted briefly over his tepid response, but only briefly. *That's good!* she wrote. *If you're not villainous, you shouldn't let anyone say you are!*

Once again, she took the pen and paper back from him before he could think to write a response. He read what she added as she added it. *But if I ever I say it, it'll really be because you are disappointing me like my sister, so don't let this go to your head!*

This time she let him keep the pen. Rand strangled his annoyance as he wrote. She had a lot of energy, this girl. A lot of thoughts, too, and limited ways to express them. He felt sorry for her. *I'll try not to. Speaking of Lili, where is she? Well, writing of, I suppose. Sorry.*

Rosaline read and waved off his apology, then started writing. *I told you she was lazy! She probably won't be seen until noon. Such a baby, and she's supposed to be the elder.*

He went back and forth with himself over whether to respond to that, decided there was nothing he could write that wouldn't insult one or the other, and settled on a wimpy shrug. They had finished their breakfasts by then. Rand supposed he should get ready to go. He needed to get back to Cairhien. And he needed to fix the Damodreds' wall before going. A little channelling would do the job there. It wouldn't be pretty but it would work just the same.

I should go, he wrote. *It was nice meeting you.*

She wrote hastily. *Do you mean to the City? Don't! You made yesterday much more exciting. Stay awhile.*

He smiled. Then bit his lip as his conscience warned him not to write what he was thinking. *I would like to. The company of beautiful and interesting girls is hard to turn down. But I have work to do and evil to smite. I can't afford to be as lazy as ... some.*

Rand lingered only long enough to see her feline smile become a silent gasp of outrage. He was up and moving by the time she reached for her pen. When he looked back from the doorway, she was holding it impotently in her ink-stained hands. She stamped her foot at him. He grinned, and left.

The manor house was quiet this early. Rand wandered aimlessly. As he paced the corridors over colourful rugs and past rich tapestries, glancing with little interest at the antique porcelain and metalwork ornaments, he tried to imagine Moiraine growing up here. He failed. Imagining Moiraine as a young girl at all was beyond him. In his mind she had always been the cool and mysterious Aes Sedai who'd plucked him from his peaceful home and turned his life into insanity. Except that she was now also the woman who shared his bed, and moaned so sweetly while allowing him access to her

body. That would have unimaginable once, too. Yet, even knowing that, his imagination simply could not conjure a childhood version of her.

With her being so much on his mind, he could not help but gape when he turned a corner and found her standing alone, staring pensively at the portraits that lined the walls. His mind reeled, for she did in fact look younger than usual. She had not dressed as yet, nor donned her usual jewellery. She must have risen from the bed but recently, found that dark grey robe in the guest room and belted it on before going wandering as he had. Her black hair was still tousled from sleep.

That marble composure of hers slapped into place as soon as she realised she was no longer alone. It remained so as he approached, though perhaps more so for the Maidens who followed than Rand himself. He looked over the skilfully painted portraits. Black-haired, brown-eyed, pale-skinned women, and some few men. Whether coat or dress, they all had those lengthy stripes in the Damodred colours marching down their fronts. Not a single one of them was smiling.

“More relatives?” he asked.

“They are of no account,” she said coolly.

After a pause, Rand looked to the Maidens. “I would like some privacy.” He thought they might object at first, but soon enough they were dispersing, half going back the way they’d come, and half prowling down the corridor ahead, pausing long enough to stick their heads into any connecting rooms before moving on.

“You are curious about her. It is understandable,” Moiraine said once they were alone. “For a woman you never met, she had quite the impact on your life.” She was studying the portrait of a severely handsome woman with long, grey hair. The crown she wore showed the Rising Sun of Cairhien, depicted in yellow diamonds. He knew it. It sat in the palace he ruled now, waiting for ... someone.

“It’s not her I’m curious about at all,” Rand said quietly.

Her lips curved slightly, but she refused to be diverted. “She provoked the war that led to your birth on Dragonmount, Rand. And set the course of my life for a second time in the process. It is rather important.”

He considered. “True enough. But what do the details of her life matter? She’s dead and gone, and no-one misses her. What was it like growing up here? I’ve been trying to picture you as a little girl but my imagination fails me.”

Moiraine laughed in what he thought genuine surprise. “That is what you want to know? You think that matters? You would ...” Her delight faded slowly. She turned to the portrait again, her thoughts distant.

“I would.”

It was a while before she spoke. “I was accounted a wicked girl. Unfairly, I always thought. Though, now ... To paraphrase a colloquialism somewhat close to your home, you might say I was the white sheep of the family. And happy to be so. They were happy to be rid of me, once I began to channel.”

“You were a wilder?”

The sharp look she gave him lasted only a moment. “I suppose I was. The term is considered a slur in Tar Valon, in case you haven’t realised.”

Rand made a rude noise. “From what I’ve gathered, I’m a wilder, too. So are Nynaeve and Aviendha and Merile. I don’t give a goat’s behind what the Tower has to say about it.”

“That is fittingly wild,” she said with a small smile.

“You’re one to talk.” Her soft laughter shivered through the empty hallway. Touching his lips with his tongue, Rand reached out and brushed a few loose strands of hair behind her ear. “In more ways than one.”

“I know,” Moiraine said contritely. “I surprised myself in that. Perhaps I *am* the wicked girl they thought me, but what of it? They deserve to be scandalised.”

She was much his elder, but also much shorter. Bending so low to kiss her always felt a little strange. He would do it every day for the rest of his life if he could. “Perhaps we should go back to bed, and scandalise them some more ...” he whispered when their lips parted.

“Why would we want to do that?” she asked.

Rand straightened, surprised and a little hurt. “I ... I only meant ... Well, i-if you don’t want to, that’s—”

Moiraine laughed softly and reached up to touch his cheek. "You misunderstand ..." she whispered. Her fingers trailed down his face and across his naked chest and stomach, until they reached his belt. She began to undo it. "Shhh. I want to show you just how wicked I can be ..."

Rand wasn't sure if she meant him or the portraits and was past caring. She had lowered his smallclothes by then and was kneeling with her face level with his exposed privates. He could feel her warm breath against them. His heart was racing but his manhood did not stir.

Moiraine cupped his balls and caressed them gently. Her soft lips kissed first one and then the other. She kissed his cock as well, but he remained worryingly soft. He hadn't stirred the night before either, despite having her so close. The blood loss.

Undeterred, she took his softness in her mouth. Her tongue and lips were all over him, moving slowly and sensuously. Seeing that dignified woman on her knees before him, sucking him so indecently while her royal ancestors looked on woke a fire in Rand. He wanted to pick her up, slam her against the wall, and fuck her brains out. Instead he stood there, transfixed by her beautiful black eyes as played with his manhood.

He felt himself begin to stir with no small amount of relief. Moiraine sucked harder as she felt him thicken, her hands clutching at his thighs and ass. She had to lean back as his length grew but she never let him leave her mouth, nor did her tongue cease its wicked work.

By the time she'd restored him to his full size, her jaw had to strain to accommodate him. Her small hands worked his shaft while her mouth worked the head. It felt so good. And she looked so good, bobbing on him like that. But he wanted more.

"I have to have you," he panted.

She left him glistening with her saliva. "Then take me," she said, untying the belt of her robe and shrugging out of it. The only thing between him and her body was the nightdress she'd been wearing. Rand seized it but she raised her hands at once, surrendering to their mutual desire, and sparing him the need to rip the fabric.

She was beautiful in her nudity, but he barely had a moment to appreciate her slender paleness, for she took him by the hand and pulled him down atop her right there in the hallway, on a soft white carpet that probably cost more than his father's old farm would have. They were alone but if the Maidens came back or let some dignitary breach their cordon ... Moiraine's slim legs silked against his sides. He could feel her heat beating against his cock with each thud of her heart. The Maidens and dignitaries could just get burnt.

Rand's lips found hers in a fierce kiss. His sex found hers, too, blindly rubbing against her softness, searching for a way inside. He wasn't sure what he was poking but he could tell she liked it. She liked it more when he slid inside her wetness.

She broke their kiss to gasp at the ceiling. Her eyes flickered over the portraits. "Fuck me, Rand. Ravage me."

He was already doing exactly that but still found himself shaking his head. "Burn me. I never imagined I'd hear you say something so slutty."

She bit her lip as she accepted his manhood. "Yessss. Fuck my slutty pussy. Take me, right here. Make me your slave."

Rand's worries about arousal were a very distant memory. He slammed into Moiraine's body, giving her his full length and giving it fast. Sexy, wanton sounds spilled from her with each thrust. If she felt any discomfort, the only sign was the slight frown between her brows. She squeezed her own breast each time he moved, while her other hand clutched at one of the arms he supported himself with.

She was being shockingly loud, given their public location. So many yeses were moaned that morning that it was hard to tell if she was coming or not, or coming again even. She really had gone wild. Rand loved it. Moiraine's legs were spread as wide as they could go as she offered up her hole to him. Or her holes perhaps.

He bit his lip. She had let him do it before, and considering the mood she was in ... Her wanton moans took on a tinge of disappointment when his cock left her pussy. Her eyes were already wide, her cheeks rouged, her mouth hanging open. It was impossible to tell if she was surprised when he took his cock in hand and moved it towards her lower hole. She didn't try to stop him, though, and when he pushed against her tight ring and felt her spread to accommodate him, the yeses began anew.

Entering her ass thrilled him, and having it entered thrilled her even more. Moiraine actually giggled. Giggled! She tried to hide it by covering her mouth with her hand but he had seen and heard.

There was no way he was ever going to forget that, or allow her to. She noticed his grin, too, and knew her fate. Her blushes spurred him to fuck her ass as lustily as he had her pussy. She took it all, her tightness pressing against every inch of him and her lewdness practically shaking the walls.

She lay before him, spread wide, holding nothing back from him. Rand claimed her utterly, sampling her ass for a time before going back to her pussy. They felt different but they were equally pleasurable to him. He alternated between them over and over as they fucked.

“So ... you ... were ... a naughty ... girl,” he said between thrusts. “It shows ... in ... what a ... naughty ... woman ... you are ...”

“You want me to show you?” Moiraine gasped. “I’ll show you.” She pushed against his unwounded side, urging him to roll. He went so deep into her ass that his balls rested against the cheeks of her bottom, and then gave her what else she wanted. Moiraine sat up. “I’ll show you all.”

She started riding him, her breasts and hair shaking with each rise and fall. He found himself staring at her stiff brown nipples as she fucked him with her ass. Any doubts that she’d been enjoying it were banished from his mind, for she was moving every bit as hard and as fast as he’d been. Her full-throated moans suited the defiant way she looked from portrait to portrait. Rand found himself thinking that she’d never looked more queenly to him, and knew himself mad.

He didn’t know if the way Moiraine threw back her head and gave a particularly deep groan signified what he hoped. She’d been so noisy already, after all. But he chose to believe it did, and she had, either then or before. He always tried to please those he was intimate with; doing otherwise felt like a personal failure to him. So it had to have been, because he didn’t think he could possibly hold it a moment longer.

Moiraine kept rising and falling, her ass demanding its tribute of him. He gritted his teeth as he gave it, in a pointless effort to keep things quiet.

Her wordless sound of surprise became a smile. “That’s it ... Fill my slutty ass, savage. Soil me with your common seed.”

Even when floating in orgasmic bliss, that seemed a bit rude. But, dim as his thoughts had grown, he still knew her words were not meant for him. Besides, it was at least partially true. He was a commoner, and filling her slutty ass with his seed was something he was very happy to do.

As the lust and passion faded, and they found themselves naked in a hallway with no way of knowing who was close enough to have heard anything, an awkwardness set in. Moiraine slid slowly off the not yet soft cock that impaled her. As soon as it popped out, she reached for her discarded robe.

Rand was slower to get up. “So. You were one of those bad girls my father warned me about.”

She laughed softly. “I would not describe myself so. And even if others might, is it bad to be bad to those who are worse?”

“Eh. I’m way too fucked for philosophy.”

Her laugh was louder this time. She was already dressed, and standing over him. “I hope I am not going to have to send the Maidens to haul you up and get you dressed, Rand. You are young, but not that young.”

Taking a deep breath, he dragged up his breeches, cinched his belt, and got to his feet. She gave a sarcastic little clap, and led him briskly away from the scene of their crime.

Rand was glad of her presence when they caught up to the Maidens. They weren’t that far away, and he was almost sure they would have heard at least some of what had happened. If it had been him alone, or him and some other woman, he had no doubt they would have gone off like fireworks. None of them would dare say a word to Moiraine, though. He seized the opportunity to politely and conscientiously suggest a change of shift, thanking those who had guarded his sleep and urging them to catch a little of their own before they departed for the city. They went, if reluctantly, as soon as they encountered the new group waiting outside the door to the guest room Raine still slept in.

Rand slipped in only long enough to recover his boots, then left Moiraine to get dressed properly. He still had to recover his coat from Ayame. Walking around half-naked was all well and good first thing in the morning, but started to look a bit silly as the hours ticked by.

By noon they were ready to depart. House Damodred swore the oaths, as predicted. Also as predicted, Lili rose from her bed just in time to bid him farewell. Rand finished fixing the wall he’d demolished while his forces were marshalling to leave and the Damodreds looked on.

Well, except her, of course. She stood with Hana, who narrated events for her.

“He is a nice boy,” he heard her say. “It would be a shame if Rosaline comes to have too much of an influence on him.”

They were trouble, those Damodreds. But Moiraine was trouble, too. His kind of trouble. Goodbyes were exchanged, some polite, some sullen, one silent.

Lili smiled warmest of all. “Thank you for your presence, my Lord Dragon.”

At her side, Hana bobbed her head shyly. “Th ... thanks. You’ll come again?”

He had not intended to. This trip had already gotten him all he needed, and more than he’d bargained for. But ... “I look forward to it,” he found himself saying. He really was a fool sometimes.

CHAPTER 13: To Teach and Learn



Nynaeve would be glad when they finally reached Salidar. The rough travel was wearing on some people's nerves. Not hers, of course. But those other supposed women had gotten too used to warm baths and comfortable beds. Elayne was being even more obnoxious than usual these days. It was only to be expected, spoiled as she was. The only shock had been that Nynaeve had let her bully her. Well, that would never happen again!

The Daughter-Heir had been involved in an odd exchange earlier that day, while tempers were still tender and tongues—some people's tongues!—still rough. Nynaeve said something, quite mildly, about Elayne not being in her mother's palace, so she need not think Nynaeve was going to put up with her tantrums. Elayne tilted up her chin, but before she could open her mouth, Birgitte blurted, “You *are* the Daughter-Heir of Andor?”

“I am.” Elayne sounded more dignified than Nynaeve remembered in some time, but there was a hint of—could it be satisfaction?

Face completely blank, Birgitte simply rode ahead, staring off through the trees. Elayne frowned after her, then finally went to ride beside her. They sat their horses talking softly for some time. Nynaeve would not have joined them even had she been asked! Whatever they discussed, Elayne seemed slightly disgruntled, as if she had expected some other result, but after that there was hardly a cross word between them.

“I’ll wager Rand didn’t go for a ride through the woods today,” Elayne said sometime later, when the sun was low.

“Stop moaning like a cow,” Nynaeve told her firmly.

Elayne ignored her perfectly reasonable suggestion and went right on moaning. “I wish I were there. To guide him, I mean.” She looked from Keestis to Nynaeve, red touching her cheeks. “Well, that, too.” Nynaeve and Keestis began laughing so hard they nearly fell out of their saddles, and Elayne joined in almost immediately.

So it was that, despite the rigours of the journey, they were in good spirits when the woods abruptly ended just ahead and a bustling village came into view. Nynaeve wasn’t sure that it was their destination at first, despite Ragan and Birgitte looking so satisfied with themselves. Salidar was supposedly abandoned, but this place was full of people. Too full for a small village. There were more people within sight than she’d have seen for the Bel Tine festival back in Emond’s Field.

They were surprisingly welcoming of strangers, too. The arrival of an armed band as odd as theirs would have had men reaching for sticks and women gathering up their children back home. These ones greeted them with introductions, inquiries and an assurance of shelter. Nynaeve was too wary to ask after Aes Sedai, and searching the crowd revealed none. Surrounded by that mob, it would almost have been a relief if some muscle-headed Warder had appeared one of nowhere in his fool cloak. It would have been more than a relief if a certain muscle-headed Warder had done so.

There were children in the crowd as well. That unnerved her for several reasons. Aes Sedai did not have children, or tolerate their presence for long in the White Tower. In addition, Nynaeve had never really been comfortable around children. True, she wanted to have Lan’s babies. Part of her did. But still. Children could make a mess from nothing. They seemed to have the habit of doing the opposite of what you told them as soon as your back was turned, just to see how you would react. Yet she found herself smoothing back the dark hair of a boy no higher than her waist who stared up at her owlishly with bright blue eyes. They looked very like Lan’s eyes.

Elayne and Birgitte joined her, just to ask questions at first, but one way or another they gravitated to the children, too. Strangely, Birgitte did not look at all silly with a boy of three or four cradled on either hip and a ring of children about her, singing them a nonsense song about dancing animals. And Elayne handed round a sack of sweet red candies. The Light knew where she had gotten them, or why. She did not look guilty at all when Nynaeve caught her sneaking one into her own mouth; she only grinned, gently pulled a little girl’s thumb from her mouth and replaced it with

another candy. The children laughed as if just remembering how, and snuggled themselves into Nynaeve's skirts, or Elayne's or Birgitte's, as easily as into their mothers'. It was very difficult to maintain any sort of temper in those circumstances. She could not even bring herself to do more than sniff, and that faintly, when a tearful Emara, similarly surrounded by children, asked openly if this was in fact Salidar.

It was. Nynaeve was quietly surprised, Juilin vocally so. His genially curiosity almost fooled even her, and it got the crowd talking in no time. The gathering of Aes Sedai was not as secret as it used to be. People had been flocking in from all around, fleeing the troubles of the world. For where could possibly be safer than a village full of Aes Sedai?

Each of them had a story, and many were eager to share. Nicola was about her age and height, a slender dark-haired weaver with big eyes who had been intending to marry. Until her Hyran took it into his head that duty called him to follow the Prophet, to follow the Dragon Reborn; he would marry her when his duty was seen to. Duty had been very important to Hyran. He would have made a good and conscientious husband and father, so Nicola said. Only, whatever was in his head had not done him much good when someone split it with an axe. Nicola did not know who, or why, just that she had to get as far from the Prophet as she could. Somewhere, there had to be a place where there was no killing, where she would not always be in fear of what might be around the next corner.

Areina was younger, with steady blue eyes in a face bruised purple and yellow, and no more Altaran than Nicola. Her clothes would have said that if nothing else did, a short dark coat and voluminous trousers not much different from Birgitte's. They were the sum of her possessions. She would not say where she was from exactly, but she was forthcoming about the road that had led her to Salidar. About some of it; Nynaeve had to infer in places. Areina had gone to Illian meaning to bring her younger brother home before he could take the oath as a Hunter for the Horn. With thousands in the city, however, she had never found him, but somehow she had found herself taking the oath, setting out to see the world while not quite believing the Horn of Valere existed, half hoping that somewhere she would find young Gwil and take him home. Things had been ... difficult ... since. Areina was not precisely reluctant to talk, but she made such an effort to put a good face on things ... She had been chased out of several villages, robbed once, and beaten several times. Even so, she had no intention of giving up or seeking sanctuary, or a peaceful village. The world was still out there, and Areina meant to wrestle it to the ground. Not that she put it that way, but Nynaeve knew it was what the woman meant.

Nynaeve knew very well why they touched her most, too. Each story could have been the reflection of a thread in her own life. What she did not quite understand was why she liked Areina best. It was her opinion, putting this and that together, that nearly all of Areina's troubles came from having too free a tongue, telling people exactly what she thought. It could hardly be coincidence that she was harried out of one village so quickly she had to leave her horse behind after calling the mayor a pie-faced loon and telling some village women that dry-bones kitchen sweepers had no right to question why she was on the road alone. That was what she admitted to saying. Nynaeve thought a few days of herself for example would do Areina worlds of good. And there had to be something she could do for Nicola, as well. She could understand a desire for safety and peace very well, and the girl reminded her of Egwene, if only in appearance. Egwene had certainly never sought sanctuary from anything.

Similar stories abounded. Whether it was for sanctuary or adventure, there was a gathering taking place in Salidar. And it was all centred around the Aes Sedai, as became plain when the crowd parted around a woman with an ageless face, who was weighing and measuring Nynaeve's party.

An hour later, the sweat running down Nynaeve's face had very little to do with unseasonable heat, and she was wondering whether it might not have been better if Ragan had gotten them lost. Or they'd taken a ship to Tear. Late-afternoon sunlight slanted sharply through windows with mostly cracked panes. Clutching her skirts in blended irritation and unease, she tried to avoid looking at the six Aes Sedai grouped around one of the sturdy tables near the wall. Their mouths moved silently as they conferred behind a screen of *saidar*. Elayne had her chin high, her hands folded calmly at her waist, but a tightness about her eyes and the corners of her mouth spoiled her regal air. Nynaeve was not sure she wanted to know what the Aes Sedai were saying; one stunning blow after another had knocked all her high expectations into a daze. One more shock and she thought she might scream, and she did not know whether from fury or pure hysteria.

Keestis was doing a poor imitation of Elayne. One that amounted to standing very still and clenching her jaw so hard Nynaeve worried her teeth might break. The One Power couldn't restore those. Shimoku and Emara looked the most chastened of all, the smiles they'd worn at the start now thoroughly crushed. Their eyes were fixed on the carpet between their toes.

Very nearly everything except their clothes was laid out on that table, from Birgitte's silver arrow in front of stout Morvrin to the three *ter'angreal* they'd recovered before Sheriam, to the gilded coffers in front of dark-eyed Myrelle. Not one of the women looked pleased. Carlinya's face might have been carved from snow, even motherly Anaiya wore a stern mask, and Beonin's look of constant wide-eyed startlement had a distinctly annoyed cast. Annoyed and something more. Sometimes Beonin made as if to touch the white cloth spread neatly over the *cuendillar* seal, but her hand always stopped and retreated.

Nynaeve's eyes jerked away from the cloth. She knew exactly when things had begun to go wrong. She and Elayne had told the story they had agreed on to Phaedrine Sedai, or tried to. Five minutes into it, and the lean Brown sister had hustled them off to this place—a former inn from the looks of it—then left them with strict orders not to move a foot or speak a word, even to each other. Ten more minutes, staring at one another in confusion, while all around them Accepted and white-clad Novices, Warders and servants and soldiers bustled between tables where Aes Sedai pored over papers and briskly handed out orders, and then they had been hustled before Sheriam and the others so quickly Nynaeve did not think her shoes had touched the floor twice. That was when the grilling had begun, more suitable for captured prisoners than returning heroes. Nynaeve dabbed at the perspiration on her face, but as soon as she tucked the handkerchief back up her sleeve, her hands returned to their grip on her skirts.

She and her Accepted were not alone standing on the colourful silk carpet. Siuan, in a plain dress of fine blue wool, might have been there by choice if Nynaeve had not known better, her face cool, utterly composed. She seemed lost in untroubled thought. Leane at least watched the Aes Sedai, yet she appeared equally confident. In fact, somehow more self-confident than Nynaeve remembered. The copper-skinned woman looked even more willowy, too, more supple in some fashion. Perhaps it was her scandalous dress. That pale green silk was every bit as high-necked as Siuan's, but it clung to every curve of her, and the material only managed to be opaque by a thin hair. It was their faces that truly stunned Nynaeve, though. She had never expected to find either alive, and certainly never looking so very young—no more than a few years older than she if that. They did not so much as glance at one another. In truth, she thought she detected a distinct chill between them.

There was another difference about them, one that Nynaeve was just beginning to recognize. No-one made any real secret of the fact that they had been Stilled. Nynaeve could feel that lack. Perhaps it was being in a room where all the other women could channel, or perhaps it was knowing they had been Stilled, but for the first time she was truly conscious of the ability in Elayne and the others. And its absence from Siuan and Leane. Something had been taken from them, cut away. It was like a wound. Perhaps the worst wound a woman could suffer.

Curiosity overcame her. What sort of wound would it be? What had been cut away? She might as well make use of the waiting. She reached out to *saidar* ...

"Did anyone grant you permission to channel here, Accepted?" Sheriam asked, and Nynaeve gave a start, hurriedly releasing the True Source.

The green-eyed Aes Sedai led the others back to their mismatched chairs, arranged on the carpet in a semicircle that had the standing women as its focus. Some of them carried things from the table. They sat staring at Nynaeve, earlier emotion swallowed in Aes Sedai calm. None of those ageless faces acknowledged the heat by so much as a single bead of moisture. Finally Anaiya said in a gently chiding voice, "You have been very long from us, child. Whatever you have learned in the interval, you have apparently forgotten much."

Blushing, Nynaeve curtsied. "Forgive me, Aes Sedai. I did not mean to overstep." She hoped they thought it was shame that heated her cheeks. She *had* been away from them a long time. Just one day ago, *she* had given the orders and people jumped when she spoke. Now she was the one expected to jump. It galled.

"You tell an interesting ... story." Carlinya obviously believed little of it. The White sister turned Birgitte's silver arrow over in long slender hands. "And you acquired some strange possessions."

"The Panarch Amathera gave us many gifts, Aes Sedai," Elayne said. "She seemed to think we saved her throne." Even delivered in a perfectly level voice, that speech was a walk on thin ice. Nynaeve was not the only one irritated by their fall from freedom. Carlinya's smooth face tightened.

"You come with disturbing news," Sheriam said. "And some disturbing ... things." Her slightly tilted eyes wandered to the table, to the *ter'angreal* whip Keestis had taken from Temaile, and returned firmly to the Accepted. Since learning what it was, what it was for, most of the Aes Sedai had treated it like a live red adder. Most had.

"If the thing does what these children claim," Morvrin said absently, "we need to study it. And if Elayne really believes she can make a *ter'angreal* ..." The Brown sister shook her head. Her real attention was on the flattened stone ring, all flecked and striped in red and blue and brown, that she held in one hand. The other *ter'angreal* lay on her broad lap. "You say that this came from Verin Sedai? How is it this was never mentioned to us before?" That was not directed at Elayne, but at Suan.

Suan frowned, but not the fierce frown Nynaeve remembered. It held a touch of diffidence, as if she knew she was speaking to her superiors, and so did her voice. That was another change Nynaeve could hardly believe. "Verin never told me of it. I would very much like to ask her a few questions."

"And *I* have questions about *this*," Myrelle's olive face darkened as she unfolded a familiar paper—why had they ever kept that?—and read aloud. "'What the bearer does is done at my order and by my authority. Obey, and keep silent, at my command. Suan Sanche, Watcher of the Seals, Flame of Tar Valon, The Amyrlin Seat'." She crumpled the paper and its seal in her fist. "Hardly something to be handed out to Accepted."

"At the time, I did not know who I could trust," Suan said smoothly. The six Aes Sedai stared at her. "It was within my authority then." The six Aes Sedai did not blink. Her voice took on a thread of exasperated pleading. "You cannot call me to account for doing what I had to do when I had a perfect right to do it. When the boat's sinking, you plug the hole with what you can find."

"And why did you not tell us?" Sheriam asked quietly, but with a hint of steel. As Mistress of Novices she had never raised her voice, though sometimes you wished she would. "Fifteen Accepted—Accepted!—sent out of the Tower chasing thirteen full sisters of the Black Ajah. Do you use babies to plug the hole in your boat, Suan?"

"We are hardly babies," Nynaeve told her heatedly. "Several of those thirteen are dead, and we thwarted their plans twice. In Tear, we—"

Carlinya cut her off like an icy knife. "You have told us all about Tear, child. And Tanchico. And defeating Moghedien." Her mouth twisted wryly. She had already said that Nynaeve had been a fool to come within a mile of one of the Forsaken, that she was lucky to have escaped with her life. That Carlinya did not know how right she was—they certainly had not told everything—only made Nynaeve's stomach clench tighter. "You *are* children, and lucky if we decide not to spank you. Now hold your peace until you are called on to speak." Nynaeve flushed heavily, hoping they took it for embarrassment, and held her peace.

Sheriam had never taken her eyes from Suan. "Well? Why have you never mentioned sending these children out to hunt lions?"

"A hunt from which five of them will not be returning," Myrelle added coldly.

Nynaeve hunched her shoulders as if struck. Ronelle. Mair. Wynifred, Calindin and Asseil. She had meant to bring them all back. She had tried to, and she had failed.

She couldn't tell if Suan shared her guilt. The former Amyrlin drew a deep breath, but folded her hands and ducked her head penitently. "There seemed no point, Aes Sedai, with so much else of importance. I have held nothing back, when there was the faintest reason for telling. Every scrap I knew of the Black Ajah, I told. I've not known where these girls were or what they were up to for some time. The important thing is that they are here now, and with those *ter'angreal*. You must realize what it means to have access to Elaida's study, to her papers, if only in bits. You'd never have known that she knows where you are until it was too late, except for that."

"We realize that," Anaiya said, eyeing Morvrin, who was still frowning at the ring. "It is just that perhaps the means of it takes us a little by surprise."

"*Tel'aran'rhiod*," Myrelle breathed. "Why, it has become no more than a matter for scholarly discussion in the Tower, almost a legend. And Aiel dreamwalkers. Who would have imagined that Aiel Wise Ones could channel, much less this?"

Nynaeve wished they had been able to keep that secret—like Birgitte’s true identity and a few other things they had managed to hold back—but it was difficult to keep things from slipping out when you were being questioned by women who could bore holes in stone with a look when they wanted.

Well, she supposed she should be glad they had managed to hang on to what they had. Once *Tel’aran’rhiod* had been mentioned, and that they had entered it, a mouse would have treed cats before these women stopped asking questions.

Leane took a half-step forward, not looking at Siuan. “The *important* thing is that with these *ter’angreal* you can talk to Daniele, and through her to Moiraine. Between them, you can not only keep an eye on Rand al’Thor, you should be able to influence him even in Cairhien.”

“Where he went from the Aiel Waste,” Siuan said, “where I predicted he would be.” If her eyes and words were directed at the Aes Sedai, her astringent tone was plainly meant for Leane, who grunted.

“Much good that did. Two Aes Sedai sent off to the Waste chasing ducks.” Oh, yes, there was very definitely a chill there.

“Enough, children,” Anaiya said, very much as if they really were children and she a mother used to their petty squabbles. She eyed the other Aes Sedai meaningfully. “It will be a very good thing to be able to talk with Daniele.”

“If these work as claimed,” Morvrin said, bouncing the ring on one palm and fingering the other *ter’angreal* on her lap. The woman would not believe the sky was blue without proof.

Sheriam nodded. “Yes. That will be your first duty, Elayne, Nynaeve. You will have a chance to teach Aes Sedai, showing us how to use them.”

Nynaeve curtsied, baring her teeth; they could take it for a smile if they chose. Teach them? Yes, and never get near the ring, or the others, again after. Elayne’s curtsy was even stiffer, her face a cool mask. Her eyes rolled toward the *ter’angreal* longingly.

“The letters-of-rights will be useful,” Carlinya said. With all that White Ajah coolness and logic, testiness still showed in the way she clipped her words. “Gareth Bryne always wants more gold than we have, but with those, we may almost be able to satisfy him.”

“Yes,” Sheriam said. “And we must take most of the coin, too. There are more mouths to feed and more backs to clothe every day, here and elsewhere.”

Elayne gave a gracious nod, just as if they would not take the money whatever she said, but Nynaeve simply waited. Gold and letters-of-rights and even *ter’angreal* were only a part.

“For the rest,” Sheriam went on, “we are agreed that you left the Tower by command, however erroneous it was, and you cannot be held to account for it. Now that you are safely back with us, you will resume your studies.”

Nynaeve only breathed out slowly. It was no more than she had expected since the questioning began. Not that she liked it, but for once no-one was going to be able to accuse her of having a temper. Not when in all probability it would do no good.

Elayne, though, burst out with a sharp, “But—!”

Just that, before Sheriam cut in just as sharply. “You will resume your studies. You not Aes Sedai yet.” Those green eyes held them until she was sure they had taken it, and then she spoke again, her voice milder. Milder, but still firm. “You are returned to us, and if Salidar is not the White Tower, you may still consider it so. From what you have told us in the last hour, there is considerably more you have yet to tell.” Nynaeve’s breath caught, but Sheriam’s eyes slid back to the whip. “A pity you did not bring the Seanchan woman with you. That, you really should have done. But Accepted cannot be called to account for not thinking as Aes Sedai,” Sheriam went on. “Siuan and Leane will have many questions for you. You will cooperate with them, and answer to the best of your abilities. I trust I do not have to remind you not to take advantage of their present condition. Some Accepted, and even some Novices, have thought to lay blame for events, and even take punishments into their own hands.” That mild tone became cold steel. “Those young women are now extremely sorry for themselves. Need I say more?”

Nynaeve was no more hasty than the others to let her know she did not, which was to say they almost stammered in their haste to get it out. Nynaeve had not thought of assigning blame—to her thinking, Aes Sedai were all to blame—but she did not want Sheriam angry with her. Realizing that fact drove the truth home bitterly; the days of freedom certainly were gone.

“Good. Now you may take the jewels the Panarch gave you, and the arrow—when there is time you must tell me why she made you a gift like that—and go. One of the other Accepted will find you places to sleep. Proper dresses may be harder to come by, but they will be found. I expect you to put your ... adventures ... behind you, and fit smoothly back into your proper place.” Plain although unspoken was the promise that if they did not fit back in smoothly, they would be smoothed until they did. Sheriam gave a satisfied nod when she saw they understood.

Beonin had not said a word since the shield of *saidar* was lowered, but as Nynaeve and the others made their curtsies, the Grey sister rose and strode to the table where their things were laid out. “And what of this?” she demanded in heavy Taraboner accents, whipping aside the white cloth that covered the seal on the Dark One’s prison. For a change, her large blue-grey eyes looked more angry than startled. “Are there to be no more questions about this? Do you all mean to ignore it?” The black-and-white disc lay there, next to the washleather purse, in a dozen or more pieces, fitted back together as neatly as they could be.

“It was whole when we put it in the purse.” Nynaeve paused to work moisture back into her mouth. As much as her eyes had avoided the covering cloth before, they could not leave the seal now. Leane had smirked when she saw the Taraboner dress unwrapped from around its cargo, and said ... No, she would not run away from it, even in her head! “Why should we have thought to take special care? It’s *cuendillar*!”

“We didn’t look at it,” Elayne said breathlessly, “or touch it more than we had to. It felt filthy, evil.” It no longer did. Carlinya had made them each hold a piece, demanding to know what evil feeling they were talking about.

They had said the same things before, more than once, and no-one paid them any heed now. Sheriam rose and went to stand beside the honey-haired Grey. “We are ignoring nothing, Beonin. Asking these girls more questions will do no good. They have told us what they know.”

“More questions are always good,” Morvrin said, but she had stopped fiddling with the *ter’angreal* to stare at the broken seal as hard as anyone else. It might be *cuendillar*—she and Beonin had each tested it and said it was—yet she had broken one fragment with her hands.

“How many of the seven still hold?” Myrelle asked softly, as if speaking to herself. “How long until the Dark One breaks free, and the Last Battle comes?” Every Aes Sedai did some of almost everything, according to her talents and inclinations, yet each Ajah had its own reason for being. Greens—who called themselves the Battle Ajah—held themselves ready to face new Dreadlords in the Last Battle. There was almost a hint of eagerness in Myrelle’s voice.

“Four,” Anaiya said unsteadily. “Four still hold. If we know everything. Let us pray that we do. Let us pray four are enough.”

“Let us pray those four are stronger than this one,” Morvrin muttered. “*Cuendillar* cannot be broken so, not and *be cuendillar*. It cannot.”

“We will discuss this in due course,” Sheriam said. “After more immediate matters that we can do something about.” Taking the cloth from Beonin, she covered the broken seal once more. “Suan, Leane, we have reached a decision concerning—” She stopped short as she turned and saw the Accepted. “Were you not told to go?” For all her outward calm, the turmoil inside showed in her forgetting their presence.

Nynaeve was more than ready to drop another curtsy, blurt a hurried “By your leave, Aes Sedai,” and scurry for the door. Without moving a muscle, the Aes Sedai—and Suan and Leane—watched her and the rest go. Nynaeve felt their eyes like a shove. Elayne stepped not a whit more slowly, for all she cast another look at the ring.

Once Nynaeve had the door closed and could lean back against its unpainted wood, clutching the gilded coffer to her breasts, she took her first comfortable breath, or so it seemed, since entering the old stone inn. She did not want to think about the broken seal. Another broken seal. She would not. Those women could shear sheep with their eyes. She could almost look forward to watching their first meeting with the Wise Ones; if she was not likely to be squarely in the middle. It had been more than difficult when she first went to the Tower, learning to do as she was told by others, to bend her neck. After long months when she gave the orders—well, once she had consulted Elayne; usually—she did not know how she was going to learn to pull wool and scratch gravel all over again.

The common room, with its ill-patched plaster ceiling and cold stone fireplaces near collapsing, was the same beehive it had been when she first entered. No-one gave her more than a glance now, and she gave them less. A small crowd awaited her and Elayne.

Mendao and Juilin, on a rough bench against the flaking plaster wall, had their heads together with Rikimaru, who was squatting in front of them, long sword hilt rising over his shoulder. Areina and Nicola, who had invited themselves along, a bit presumptuously, occupied another bench with Areku, who was watching Birgitte attempt to amuse two boys by awkwardly juggling three coloured wooden balls. Kneeling behind the boys, Ragan was tickling them, whispering in their ears, but he shot to his feet once he saw Nynaeve.

Or Shimoku. "What did they say?" he asked her anxiously. "Was it as bad as you feared?"

The Kaltori might not be Aes Sedai yet, but she could keep a secret. "They were stern with us, but understand that we only did what *proper* Accepted would."

Nynaeve shook her head to herself. Fool man. As if any of them would ever have told the Aes Sedai about their private business! Light, Nynaeve wouldn't even have told her own mother about the scandalous things she'd gotten up to with Rand and Elayne. Shimoku was going to need to sit on him to keep him quiet, and not in the good way.

Only two others in the entire room were not scurrying about. Two of Myrelle's three Warders happened to be leaning against the wall in conversation a few paces beyond the benches, just this side of the door back to the kitchen corridor. Croi Makin, a yellow-haired young splinter of stone from Andor with a fine profile, and Avar Hachami, hawk-nosed and square-chinned with a thick grey-streaked moustache like down-curved horns. No-one would call Hachami handsome even before his dark-eyed stare made them swallow. They were not looking at Ragan or Juilin or anyone else, of course. It was only happenstance that they alone had nothing to do and had chosen just that spot to do it. Of course.

Birgitte had dropped one of the balls when she saw Nynaeve and Elayne. "What did you tell them?" she asked quietly, barely glancing at the silver arrow in Elayne's hand. The quiver hung at her belt; but her bow was propped against the wall.

Moving closer, Nynaeve carefully did not look toward Makin and Hachami. Just as carefully she lowered her voice and was sparing with emphasis. "We told them everything they asked for."

Elayne touched Birgitte's arm. "They know you are a good friend who has helped us. You are welcome to stay here, just the same as Juilin and the others."

Only when some of Birgitte's tension melted did Nynaeve realize how much had been there. She wore the faintest of relieved grins.

Nynaeve thought the brisk sound of boots on wood was going to herald the arrival of another Warder at first, but the person that paused in the doorway to search the room had a notably feminine figure despite her short hair and boy's clothes.

Elayne saw her first and squealed, an annoyingly loud sound that Min echoed a heartbeat later. The two girls ran to each other, all hugs, rocking from foot to foot, leaving Nynaeve to cradle her poor ear. She was sure there were supposed to be greetings and questions amidst their rapid babble, but she doubted anyone could have translated it. Shoulders were held so that once overs could be given; health was asked after, she caught that much, though neither had the sense to wait for an answer. Min was the first to confess how much she'd missed her, but a tearful Elayne echoed the sentiment immediately. Then it was back to hugging and rocking. This time, when they parted, they were holding hands.

Nynaeve watched it all in a mature silence they were both still years away from. It was not as if she hadn't known it would happen eventually. It had been a mistake from the start, her relationship ... No, she shouldn't call it that. Her dalliance with ... No! Nynaeve did not dally! Her ... mistakenly finding herself in bed with Elayne on occasion was something they had always been going to be forced to stop sooner or later. Yes. That made more sense. She wasn't even slightly jealous or hurt by the haste with which Elayne ran to embrace another woman right in front of her.

"I can't tell you how glad I am to see you," Min said for at least the fourth or fifth time. Her hair was longer than it had been, though still a dark cap around her head, and she looked different in some other way that Nynaeve could not put a finger on. Surprisingly, freshly embroidered flowers climbed the lapels of her coat; she had always worn quite plain clothes before. "A friendly face is rare around here." Her eyes flickered just a fraction toward the two Warders. "We have to settle down

alone and have a long talk. I can't wait to hear what you've been up to since you left Tar Valon." Or to tell what she had been up to as well, else Nynaeve missed her guess.

"I would like very much to talk to you, too," Elayne said, quite seriously. Min looked at her, then sighed and nodded, not as eager as a moment before.

Juilin and Ragan came up behind Min, their faces set in that way men took on when they meant to say things they thought a woman might not like to hear. Before they could open their mouths, though, a curly-haired woman in an Accepted's dress pushed between them, glowering at them, and planted herself in front of Nynaeve.

Faolain's dress, with its seven bands of colour at the hem for the Ajahs, was not quite as white as it should have been, and her dark face wore a scowl. "I am surprised to see you here, wilder. I thought you had gone running back to your village, and our fine Daughter-Heir to her mother."

"Are you still souring milk for a hobby, Faolain?" Elayne asked.

Nynaeve kept her face pleasant. Just barely. Twice in the Tower Faolain had been set to teach her something. To put her in her place, was her own opinion. Even when teacher and pupil were both Accepted, the teacher had the status of Aes Sedai so long as the lesson lasted, and Faolain took full advantage. The curly-haired woman had spent eight years as a Novice and five more as Accepted; she was not best pleased that Nynaeve had never had to be a Novice at all, or that Elayne had worn pure white for less than a year. Two lessons from Faolain, and two trips to Sheriam's study for Nynaeve, for stubbornness, temper, a list as long as her arm. She made her voice light. "I heard Siuan and Leane have been badly treated by someone. I think Sheriam means to make an example to end it once and for all." She kept her eyes steady on the other woman's, and Faolain's widened in alarm.

"I've done nothing since Sheriam—" Faolain's mouth snapped shut. Her cheeks were too dark to colour visibly, but Nynaeve was sure she was blushing. Min hid her mouth behind her hand, and Faolain jerked her head around, studying the other women, from Birgitte to Keestis. She opened her mouth at seeing Shimoku and Emara, both of whom she had pushed around back in the Tower, but something about the steady way they were looking at her now made those full lips come together in silence. Instead, she motioned brusquely to Nicola and Areina. "You two will do, suppose. Come with me. Now. No dawdling." They rose slowly, Areina staring warily and Nicola with fingers fretting at the waist of her dress.

Elayne stepped between them and Faolain before Nynaeve could, chin high and eyes imperious blue ice. "What do you want with them?"

"I am obeying Sheriam Sedai's orders," Faolain replied. "I myself think they are too old for first testing, but I obey orders. A sister accompanies Lord Bryne's recruiting parties, testing women even as old as Nynaeve." Her sudden smile could have come from a viper. "Shall I inform Sheriam Sedai that you disapprove, Elayne? Shall I tell her you won't let them be tested?" Elayne's chin came down somewhat during that, but of course she could not simply back down. She needed a diversion.

Nynaeve touched Faolain's shoulder. "Have they found many?"

In spite of herself, the woman's head turned, and when she glanced back, Elayne was soothing Areina and Nicola, explaining that they would not be hurt, or forced into anything. Nynaeve would not have gone so far. When Aes Sedai found someone with the spark born in her like Elayne, someone who would channel eventually whether she wanted to or not, they were quite open about bundling her into training whatever her wishes. They seemed more lenient about those who could be trained but would never touch *saidar* without it, and about wilders, those who had survived the one-in-four chance of teaching themselves, usually without knowing what they had done and often blocked in some way, as Nynaeve had been. Supposedly they could choose to come or stay. Nynaeve had chosen to enter the Tower, but she suspected that if she had not, she still would have gone, perhaps even tied hand and foot. Aes Sedai gave women who had the smallest chance of joining them as much choice as a lamb on a feastday.

"Three," Faolain said after a moment. "All that effort, and they've found three. One a wilder." She truly did not like wilders. "I do not know why they are so eager to find new Novices. The Novices we have can't be raised Accepted until we regain the Tower. It is all Siuan Sanche's fault, her and Leane." A muscle in her cheek twitched, as if she realized that remark might be thought to harass the former Amyrlin and Keeper, and she seized Areina and Nicola each by an arm. "Come along. I obey orders, and if you're to be tested, you'll be tested, waste of time or no waste of time."

“A nasty woman,” Min murmured, squinting after Faolain as she hurried the other across the common room. “You’d think, if there was any justice, she would have an unpleasant future ahead of her.”

Nynaeve wanted to ask what Min had seen in her viewing of the curly-haired Accepted—there were a hundred questions she wanted to ask her—but Ragan and the other men planted themselves firmly in front of her and Elayne, to either side so among them they could see in every direction. Keestis and the other two strolled over, but Birgitte was deep in conversation with Areku and did not join. The two women warriors got along well, but it was odd to see Birgitte clinging to her like that, as if using her as a shield.

Min knew what the men were up to, too, by the rueful look she gave them; she seemed about to say something, but in the end she only shrugged and crossed her arms.

By Ragan’s face, he could have been about to comment on the weather, or ask what was for supper. Nothing important. “Peace save us, these Aes Sedai think they can depose Elaida. That’s why Gareth Bryne is here. To raise an army for them.”

Juilin’s grin almost split his dark face in two. “Madwomen and madmen. I don’t care if Elaida was there the day Logain was born. They’re mad to think they can pull down an Amyrlin sitting in the White Tower from here. We could reach Cairhien in a month, maybe.”

“The guards are set to watch for people coming in, not going out,” Rikimaru whispered. “We can lose them in the forest. It’ll be dark soon. They’ll never find us.”

Nynaeve looked at Elayne, who shook her head slightly. Elayne would put up with anything to be Aes Sedai. And herself? Small chance that they could influence these Aes Sedai to support Rand if they had decided to try controlling him instead. Make that no chance; she might as well be realistic. And yet ... And yet there was Healing. She would learn nothing of it in Cairhien, but here ... Not ten paces from her, Therva Maresis, a slender Yellow with a long nose, was methodically ticking off points on a parchment with her pen. A bald-headed Warder with a black beard stood conferring with Nisao Dachen near the door, head and shoulders above her despite being no taller than average, while Dagdara Finchey, as wide as any man in the room and taller than most, addressed a group of Novices in front of one of the unlit fireplaces, briskly sending them off one by one on errands. Nisao and Dagdara were Yellow Ajah, too; it was said that Dagdara, her greying hair marking considerable age on an Aes Sedai, knew more of Healing than any two others. It was not as if Nynaeve would be able to do anything useful if she did go to Rand. Just watch him go mad. If she could progress with Healing, maybe she could find a way to hold that madness off. There was too much that Aes Sedai were willing to call hopeless and let go at that to suit her.

All of that flashed through her head in the time it took to look at Elayne and turn back to the men. “We will be staying here. Ragan, if you and the others want to go to Rand, you are free to, as far as I’m concerned. I fear I no longer have money to help you.” The gold the Aes Sedai had taken was needed just as they said, but she could not help wincing at the few silvers left in her purse. These men had followed her—and Elayne, of course—for all the wrong reasons, but that did not lessen her responsibility for them. Their loyalties were to Rand; they had no reason to enter a struggle for the White Tower. With a glance at the gilded coffer, she added reluctantly, “But I do have some things you can sell along the way.”

“You must go, too, Juilin,” Elayne said. “There’s no point in remaining. We have no need of you now, but Rand will.” She tried to press her casket of jewels into his hands, but he refused to take it.

The men exchanged looks in that irritating way they had, Mendao going so far as to roll his eyes. Nynaeve grabbed her braid. That hothead was more trouble than he was worth. If he rolled his eyes at her once more, she would slap some calmness into him. She thought she heard Juilin mutter something under his breath about having said they would be stubborn.

“Perhaps in a few days,” Rikimaru said.

“A few days,” Juilin agreed.

Mendao shrugged. “I could do with a little rest if I’m going to be running from Warders halfway to Cairhien.”

Though Ragan was supposed to be the Shienaran officer, he was the last to nod agreement, staring silently at Shimoku all the while.

Nynaeve gave them her flattest stare and deliberately tugged her braid. Elayne had her chin as high as it had ever been, her blue eyes haughty enough to chip ice. The men surely knew the signs by

now; their nonsense was not going to be allowed. “If you think you are still following Rand al’Thor’s orders to look after us—” Elayne began in frosty tones at the same time that Nynaeve said heatedly, “You promised to do as you were told, and I mean to see—”

“To tell the truth,” Juilin broke in, “I am just staying because Mendao owes me money. Dice.”

Elayne stared, at a loss for words, and Nynaeve was having difficulty finding them herself. How far they had fallen. Not so much as a shifted foot between them. The trouble was that she was torn. She had determined to send them away. She had, and not because she didn’t want them around watching her curtsy and scrape right and left. Not at all. Yet with almost nothing in Salidar as she had expected, she had to admit, however reluctantly, that it would be ... comforting ... to know she and Elayne had more than Birgitte to depend on. Even her ... no, no longer *her* Accepted, even Keestis, Shimoku and Emara could not be entirely relied on anymore. Their loyalty had been based on that note from the Amyrlin Seat. If she got in trouble with the Aes Sedai from here on out, the three of them might be as likely to side against her as with. Not that she would take up the offer of escape, of course—if that was what it should be called—not under any circumstances. Their presence would just be ... comforting. Certainly not that she would let them know that. She would not have to, since they were going, whatever they thought. Rand could find use for them, very probably, and they would only get in the way here. Except ...

The unpainted door opened, and Siuan stalked out, followed by Leane. They stared at each other coldly before Leane sniffed and glided away, startlingly sinuous as she vanished around Croi and Avar into the corridor that led to the kitchens. Nynaeve frowned slightly. In the midst of all that iciness there had been one instant, a brief flicker she almost missed even with it right in front of her ...

Siuan swung toward her, then abruptly stopped short, her face going blank. Someone else had joined the small gathering.

Gareth Bryne, dented breastplate buckled over his plain buff-coloured coat and steel-backed gauntlets tucked behind his sword belt, radiated command. Mostly grey hair and a bluff face gave him the appearance of a man who had seen everything, endured everything; a man who could endure anything.

Elayne smiled, nodding graciously. A far cry from her astonished stares, coming into Salidar, when she had first recognized him at the length of the street. “I will not say it is entirely good to see you, Lord Gareth. I have heard of some difficulty between Mother and you, but I am sure it can be mended. You know Mother is hasty sometimes. She will come ’round, and ask you back to your proper place in Caemlyn, you may be certain of it.”

“Done is done, Elayne.” Ignoring her astonishment—Nynaeve doubted anyone who knew Elayne’s rank had ever been so curt to her—he turned to Ragan. “Have you thought on what I said? Shienarans are the finest heavy cavalry in the world, and I have lads who are just right for proper training.”

Ragan tried to keep his scarred face composed, but you would have to be an utter fool not to read the way he looked at Shimoku. There would be trouble if he didn’t learn to keep a secret as well as she did. Slowly, he nodded. “We are sworn to another lord, but I guess we can help out for awhile.”

Bryne clapped him on the shoulder. “Well enough. Come with me. And don’t expect much sleep. Around here, everything needs doing yesterday, except what should have been done last week.” Pausing, he looked at Siuan again. “My shirts came back only half clean today.” With that he was leading the Shienarans off. Siuan glared at his back, then shifted her frown to Min, and Min grimaced and darted off the way Leane had gone. Birgitte heaved a sigh.

Nynaeve did not understand that last exchange at all. And the nerve of those men, thinking they could talk over her head—or under her nose, or whatever—without her understanding every word. Enough of them, anyway.

“A good thing he has no need for a thief-catcher,” Juilin said, eyeing Siuan sideways, and plainly uncomfortable. He had not gotten over the shock of learning her name; Nynaeve was not sure he had taken in about her being Stilled, and no longer the Amyrlin Seat. He certainly shifted his feet for *her*. “This way I can sit and talk. I’ve seen a lot of fellows who look like they might unwind over a mug of ale.”

“He practically ignored me,” Elayne said incredulously. “I don’t care what the trouble is between him and Mother, he has no right ... Well, I will tend to Lord Gareth Bryne later. I have to talk to Min, Nynaeve.”

Nynaeve started to follow as Elayne hurried toward that hall to the kitchens—Min would give straight answers—but Suan caught her arm in an iron grip.

The Suan Sanche who had meekly ducked her head before those Aes Sedai was gone. No-one here wore the shawl. Her voice never rose; it did not need to. She fixed Juilin with a stare that had him almost jumping out of his skin. “You watch what questions you ask, thief-catcher, or you’ll gut yourself for market.” If she felt at all guilty about sending the Accepted into danger, it did not show in the hard stares she gave them. Those cold blue eyes shifted to Birgitte; even she blinked. “You lot go find an Accepted named Jen Tacabar and ask her about somewhere to sleep tonight. Well? Move your feet!” Before they had stirred a step—and Birgitte was moving as quickly the rest, maybe quicker—she rounded on Nynaeve. “You, I have questions for. You were told to cooperate, and I suggest you do if you know what’s good for you.”

It was like being caught in a high wind. Before Nynaeve knew it, Suan was hurrying her up rickety steps with a railing cobbled together from unpainted wood, hustling her down a rough-floored corridor to a tiny room with two cramped beds built into the wall, one above the other. Suan took the only stool, motioning her to sit on the lower bed. Nynaeve chose to stand, if only to show she was not going to be pushed. There was not much else in the room. A washstand with a brick propping up one leg held a chipped pitcher and basin. A few dresses hung from pegs, and what appeared to be a pallet lay rolled up in one corner. Nynaeve had fallen far in the space of a day, but Suan had fallen farther than she could imagine. She did not think she would have too much trouble with the woman. Even if Suan did still have the same eyes.

Suan sniffed. “Suit yourself, then, girl. The ring. It doesn’t require channelling?”

“No. You heard me tell Sheriam—”

“Anyone can use it? A woman who can’t channel? A man?”

“Possibly a man.” *Ter’angreal* that did not need the Power usually worked for men or women. “For any woman, yes.”

“Then you are going to teach me to use it.”

Nynaeve raised one eyebrow. This might be a lever to get what she wanted. If not, she had another. Maybe. “Do they know about this? All the talk was of showing *them* how it works. You were never mentioned.”

“They don’t know.” Suan did not appear shaken at all. She even smiled, and not pleasantly. “And they won’t. Else they’ll learn you Accepted have been posing as full sisters since you left Tar Valon. Moiraine might be letting the other half of your little army get away with it but Sheriam, Carlinya ...? They’ll have you squealing like a spawning grunter before they’re done. Long before.”

“That’s ridiculous.” Nynaeve realized she was sitting on the edge of the bed. She did not remember sitting down. The Shienarans and Juilin would hold their tongues ... Probably. Once she’d put the fear of the Light into Ragan and Mendao at least. No-one else knew. She had to talk to Elayne. “We haven’t pretended anything of the sort.”

“Don’t lie to me, girl. If I needed confirmation, your eyes gave it. Your stomach is turning somersaults, isn’t it?”

It most certainly was. “Of course not. If I teach you anything, it’s because I want to.” She was not going to let this woman bully her. The last vestige of pity winked out. “If I do, I want something in return. To study you and Leane. I want to know if Stilling can be Healed.”

“It can’t,” Suan said flatly. “Now—”

“Anything short of death should be.”

“‘Should be’ isn’t ‘is’, girl. Leane and I were promised we would be left alone. Speak to Faolain or Fana if you want to know what happens to anyone who molests us. They weren’t the first or the worst, but they cried the longest.”

Her other lever. Near panic had driven it right out of her head. If it existed. One glance. “What would Sheriam say if she knew you and Leane weren’t ready to tear out each other’s hair at all?” Suan just looked at her. “They think you’re tamed, don’t they? The more you snap at anybody who can’t snap back, the more they take it for proof when you leap to obey every time an Aes Sedai coughs. Was a little cringing all it took to make them forget the two of you had worked hand-in-hand for years? Or did you convince them Stilling had changed everything about you, not just your face? When they find out you’ve been scheming behind their backs, manipulating them, you’ll howl louder than any grunter. Whatever *that* is.” Not so much as a blink. Suan was not going to lose her temper and

let any admissions slip out. Yet there had been something in that brief look; Nynaeve was sure of it. “I want to study you—and Leane—whenever I want. And Logain.” Perhaps she could learn something there as well. Men were different; it would be like looking at the problem from another angle. Not that she would Heal him even if she discovered how. Rand’s channelling was necessary. She was not about to loose another man on the world who could wield the Power. “If not, then you can forget about the ring, and *Tel’aran’rhiod*.” What was Siuan after there? Probably just to revisit something that at least seemed like being Aes Sedai. Nynaeve stamped firmly on momentarily rekindled pity. “And if you make any claims about us pretending to be Aes Sedai, then I’ll have no choice but to tell about you and Leane. We might be uncomfortable until the truth comes out but it will, and the truth will make you weep as long as Faolain and Fana together.”

Silence stretched. How did the other woman manage to look so cool? Nynaeve had always thought it had to do with being Aes Sedai. Her lips felt dry, the only part of her that did. If she was wrong, if Siuan was willing to put it to the test, she knew who would be weeping.

Finally, Siuan muttered, “I hope Moiraine has managed to keep the rest of their backbones more supple than this.” Nynaeve did not understand, but she hardly had time to consider it. The next instant, the other woman was leaning forward, hand outstretched. “You keep my secrets, and I will keep yours. Teach me the ring, and you can study Stilling and Gentling to your heart’s content.”

Nynaeve barely managed to hold in a relieved sigh as she clasped the offered hand. She had done it. For the first time in what seemed forever, someone had tried to bully her and failed. She almost felt ready to face Moghedien. Almost.

CHAPTER 14: Confessions



Elayne caught up with Min just outside the back door of the inn and fell in beside her. Min had what looked like two or three white shirts wadded under one arm. The sun sat on the treetops, and in the fading light the stableyard had the soft look of dirt not long turned, with a huge stump that might have belonged to an oak right in the middle. The thatch-roofed stone stable had no doors, allowing a good look at men moving among filled stalls. Surprisingly, Leane was talking to a large man on the edge of the stable's shadow. Roughly dressed, he looked a blacksmith, or a brawler. What was surprising was how close Leane stood, head tilted as she stared up at him. And then she actually patted his cheek before turning away and hurrying back into the inn. The big man stared after her a moment, then melted into the shadows.

"Don't ask me what she's up, to," Min said. "Strange people come to see Sivan or her, and some of the men, she ... Well, you saw."

Elayne did not really care what Leane did. But now that she had Min alone, she did not know how to bring up what she wanted. "What are you doing?"

"Laundry," Min muttered, shifting the shirts irritably. "I can't tell you how good it is to see Sivan the mouse for once. She doesn't know whether the eagle is going to eat her or make her a pet, but she has the same choice she gives everybody else. None!"

Elayne quickened her pace to keep up as they crossed the stableyard. Whatever that was about, it gave no opening. "Despite what the men suggested, we are staying."

"I knew you would. Not a viewing." Min's step slowed again as they started between the stable and a crumbling stone wall, down a dim alley of brush stubble and trampled weeds. "I just didn't think you would give up the chance to study again. You were always eager. Nynaeve, too, even if she won't admit it. I wish I'd been wrong. I'd go with you. At least, I ..." She muttered something furious-sounding under her breath. "Those two that left with Faolain are trouble, and that *is* a viewing."

There it was. The crack she needed. But instead of asking what she had intended, she said, "You mean Nicola and Areina? How can they be trouble?" Only a fool passed over what Min saw.

"I don't know exactly. I only caught glimpses of aura, and just out of the corner of my eye. Never when I was looking right at them, where I might have made something out. There aren't many who have auras all the time, you know. Trouble. Maybe they'll carry tales. Were you up to anything you wouldn't want the Aes Sedai to know about?"

"Certainly not," Elayne said briskly. Min looked at her sideways, and she added, "Well, nothing we didn't have to do. They can't possibly know about it anyway." This was not taking her where she wanted to go. Drawing a deep breath, she leaped off the cliff. "Min, you had a viewing about Rand and me, didn't you?" She went two steps before she realized the other woman had stopped.

"Yes." It was a wary word.

"You saw that we were going to fall in love."

"Not exactly. I saw you'd fall in love with him. I don't know what he feels for you, only that he's tied to you some way."

Elayne's mouth tightened. That was about what she had expected, but not what she wanted to hear. "*Wish*" and "*want*" trip the feet, but "*is*" makes the path smoother. That was what Lini said. You had to deal with what was, not what you wished was. "And you saw there would be someone else. Someone I'd have to ... share ... him with."

"Two," Min said hoarsely. "Two others. And ... And I'm one."

Mouth already open for the next question, for a moment Elayne could only stare. "You?" she got out at last.

Min bristled. "Yes, me! Do you think I can't fall in love with a boy? I didn't want to, but I did, and that's that." She stalked past Elayne down the alleyway, and this time Elayne was slower to catch up.

It certainly explained a few things. How nervously Min had always sidestepped talking about it. The embroidery on her lapels. And unless she was imagining it, Min was wearing rouge, too. *How do I feel about it?* she wondered. She could not sort it out. “Who is the third?” she asked quietly.

“I don’t know,” Min mumbled. “Only that she has a temper. Not Nynaeve, thank the Light.” She gave a weak laugh. “I don’t think I could have survived that.” Once more she gave Elayne a cautious sidelong look. “What does this mean between you and me? I love you. I never had a girlfriend, but sometimes I feel like you ... I want to be your friend, at the least, Elayne, and I won’t stop loving you whatever happens, but I can’t stop loving him either.”

“I don’t very much like the idea of having to share a husband,” Elayne said stiffly. That was certainly an understatement. She had had encounters with Rand and other women back in Tear. It had been thrillingly naughty, and fun. But there was a difference between fun and this.

“Me, neither. Only ... Elayne, it shames me to admit it, but I will take him any way I can get him. Not that either of us has much choice. Light, he’s scrambled my whole life. Just thinking about him scrambles my brains.” Min sounded as if she did not know whether to laugh or cry.

Elayne exhaled slowly. Not Min’s fault. Was it better that it was Min rather than, say, Berelain or somebody else she could not abide? “*Ta’veren*,” she said. “He bends the world around him. We are chips caught in a whirlpool. But I seem to recall you and me saying we’d never let a man come between us being friends. We will work it out somehow, Min. And when we find out who the third is ... Well, we’ll work that out, as well. Somehow.” *A third! Could she be Berelain? Oh, blood and ashes!*

“Somehow,” Min said bleakly. “Meanwhile, you and I are caught here in a leg trap. I know there’s another, I know I can’t do anything about it, but I had enough trouble reconciling myself to you, and ... Cairhienin women aren’t all like Moiraine. I saw a Cairhienin noblewoman in Baerlon once. On the surface, she made Moiraine look like Leane, but sometimes she said things, hinting. And her auras! I don’t think a man in the whole town was safe alone with her, not unless he was ugly, lame, and better yet, dead.”

Elayne sniffed, but she managed to make her voice light. “Never you mind about that. We have a friend, you and I, one you’ve never met. Aviendha is keeping a close eye on Rand, and he doesn’t go ten steps without a guard of Aiel Maidens of the Spear.” A Cairhienin woman? At least she had met Berelain, knew something of her. No. She was not going to fret over it like some brainless girl. A grown woman dealt with the world as it was and made the best of it. Who could it be?

They had come out into an open yard dotted with cold ashes. Huge kettles, most pitted where rust had been scrubbed away, stood against the encircling stone wall, which had been toppled in several places by trees growing up in it. Despite the shadows crossing the yard, two steaming kettles still sat on flames, and three Novices, hair sweat-soaked and white skirts tied up, were hard at work on scrub boards stuck into broad washpots full of soapy water.

With a glance at the shirts under Min’s arm, Elayne embraced *saidar*. “Let me help you with those.” Channelling to do assigned chores was forbidden—physical labour built character, so they said—but this could not be counted the same. If she swirled the shirts around in the water violently enough, there should be no reason to get their hands wet. “Tell me everything. Are Siuan and Leane as changed as they seem? How did you get here? Is Logain *really* here? And why are you laundering some man’s shirts? Everything.”

Min laughed, plainly pleased to change the subject. “‘Everything’ will take a week. But I’ll try. First, I helped Siuan and Leane get out of the dungeon Elaida had stuck them in, and then ...”

Making appropriate sounds of amazement, Elayne channelled Air to lift one of the boiling kettles clear of its flames. She hardly noticed the Novices’ incredulous stares; she was used to her own strength now, and it rarely occurred to her that she did things, without thinking, that some full Aes Sedai could not do at all. Who was the third woman? Aviendha had *better* be keeping a close eye on him.

It was quite the tale indeed. She really shouldn’t have allowed Gawyn’s role to be the most troubling part of it. Such lack of objectivity was unbecoming in a future queen. But knowing he had sided with Elaida, and killed for her even, had her chewing on her lip. She had to find some way to get him free of her before he did something even more unwise.

They had finished the laundry before Min finished her tale, and set to wandering again. Salidar bustled. Too much so, she suspected. There could not be enough houses to shelter so many people comfortably. Especially not when Aes Sedai were extremely unlikely to share.

She watched Min out of the corner of her eye as they walked. They had shared a bed before, to Elayne's delight. Whether they would again was distressingly in question, however. It had been a long time since they saw each other. They had confessed their feelings for Rand, but Min didn't know that Elayne had already acted on hers. How could she tell her that?

The approach of her secret Warder provided a welcome distraction from such thoughts, Birgitte wended her way down the streets and alleys ahead, homing in on Elayne like some magical arrow. When she turned into the alley she and Min were walking down, Min jumped.

"All is well, she is a friend," Elayne said reassuringly.

Min ignored her. She was staring at Birgitte, her jaw hanging open. A sudden suspicion wormed into Elayne's heart. Surely not Birgitte ... She had spoken of Rand's past selves before, and not always flatteringly. Would she be better or worse than Berelain? *Argh! The Light burn Rand al'Thor for doing this to me!*

"You are she," Min said. She looked dizzy, dazed, but not for the reason Elayne feared. "Birgitte, for true. Burn me, it's impossible. How? How?"

The woman of legend gave a resigned sigh. "I was ripped out untimely, Hornsunder, cast out by Moghedien to die and saved by Elayne's bonding." She spoke slowly, studying her as if to be sure she understood. "I feared you might remember who I used to be."

Min frowned at her, or the air around her. "Who you used to be?" Fists on hips, Birgitte confronted her challengingly. Min's cheeks reddened. "You don't look much different from the Birgitte I saw ride out of the sky. Even your clothes are the same, just a different colour. And a good choice, by the way. Dresses are the Shadow's work."

Birgitte grinned. "I had thought you a likeable sort. I hope you can keep a secret as well. I'd regret it if you didn't ..."

"There is no need for that kind of talk," Elayne said firmly.

"If it's not Siuan, it's Nynaeve, and now her. How'd you end up getting bullied by a Hero of the Horn, Elayne?" Min sounded disgusted with life in general.

Birgitte put a hand over her mouth and laughed. "You have the wrong end, Hornsunder. I do not command here. I am Elayne's Warder. I obey." Her smile became rueful. "Birgitte Silverbow. Faith of the Light, I'm not sure I still am that woman. So much of what I was and knew has faded like mist beneath the summer sun since my strange new birth. I'm no hero now, only another woman to make my way."

Min shook her head slowly. "I think this is a story I'll need to hear to believe."

"Not now. Or here, I think," Elayne said.

Birgitte sighed. "I'd prefer not at all. But then, I'd prefer not to be running errands. They've found a few rooms for you and the other Accepted. If you can call them that. Looked more like closets to me. Get your asses in gear and I'll show you the way."

"In gear?" What a curious thing to say. Did she mean clothed? But they already were. Birgitte had already strode off, taking with her any hope of an explanation. Elayne and Min hurried after her.

Min blew out a breath. "It really has been a long time."

"Half a year. A lot happened."

"So I see! We need to talk."

"Yes ... we ... we really do ..." Elayne admitted. It was a night for confessions, it seemed. Better to do it now than let the secret fester.

Keestis was leaning against the unpainted wall of the cottage Birgitte led them to. She stood straight when she saw Elayne coming. "I'll trust and hope you can find the rest of the way yourselves," Birgitte said before turning aside, muttering something about needing a drink. Honestly! She was as bad as a man sometimes.

"Home sweet home," Keestis said by way of greeting, smiling wryly.

Elayne matched her smile. "I tried to tell myself it was too much to expect that we'd be greeted like heroes, but I still hoped deep down. Min and I just got finished doing some laundry."

The two looked each other over, while Elayne wondered if Min wasn't viewing her friend a bit too ... viewingly. *Stop that! I can't spend my days wondering if every woman I meet is this phantom third.* Keestis would certainly be better than Berelain, though. *Stop it!*

No moment of grand reveal occurred, however. Keestis just shrugged and said, "I fear laundry is going to be a fixture in our futures. And after all we did!"

"It is highly unjust indeed."

"And they even took your *ter'angreal*! The first Maker in White Tower history, and they take her *ter'angreal* from her."

Elayne could only rest a hand against her heart and shake her head in despair. "I quite agree."

Keestis looked about dramatically, and lowered her voice. "It's just as well I kept the one you made me. Anytime you want it, just let me know."

That meant more than she realised. It meant continued access to *Tel'aran'rhiod* and contact with Rand and Daniele. It meant a *ter'angreal* to study whenever she wanted. And it meant that Keestis, at least, might be counted on for support regardless of what the Aes Sedai said. Overcome, Elayne stepped close and planted a kiss on her cheek. Said cheek pinked, and then reddened altogether when she realised Min was watching.

"Uh ... Well, that's all I wanted to say. Jen stuck me in with bloody Fana, can you believe it? What's she even here for? I was always sure she'd pick Red." She sighed. "Anyway, I'll see you tomorrow."

"She seems nice," Min said once they were alone. "What's with the thing on her nose?"

Elayne had gotten so used to seeing them that she'd forgotten how odd they once looked. "Those lenses? She got them from the Atha'an Miere. They help her to see clearly."

"Fancy. I knew some people who would have welcomed a pair."

Elayne nodded to herself. A queen who valued the welfare of her subjects would do well to negotiate a trade with the Sea Folk for such things. Or endeavour to learn how they were made. Setting that aside, she opened the door and stepped into her humble new abode. "I wonder who I am to share with. I don't suppose this is your house?"

"No. I don't know who it's assigned to," Min said with a faint blush. "Unfortunately."

The cottage was unoccupied at present. A barely furnished common room doubled as a kitchen. All three adjoining rooms were serving as bedrooms, but the way the beds had been crammed in suggested this was a recent arrangement. Well, she had slept in far worse conditions without complaint. And she had far more important things to think about.

"Unfortunate that you don't know, or unfortunate that it's not yours?"

Min's blush darkened. "Both, I would say." She wet her lips and hurried on, before Elayne's smile could blossom. "I need to tell you something first. Rand and I, we ... we m-made love." It wasn't a boast. Her big brown eyes were pained. "Or, I thought so, at least. He was gone in the morning. He left me and ran away to Tear."

Fury made Elayne's heart beat faster. To her surprise, none of it was directed at Min. "He just left you? Without even saying goodbye, or speaking at all? That churl! If I had known I would have given him a piece of both our minds. And I certainly wouldn't ... Well, I probably wouldn't ..." Would she have restrained herself in a proper manner had she known? Truly? There was nothing proper about the manner of which she'd come to know Rand in Tear.

Min was watching her. She would have seen her bite her lip, noticed how hot her face was. There was no sense denying it, and every reason not to. "If there is guilt in this, it is a guilt shared. Shared. Light. That word is fast becoming tainted."

"Oh?"

Elayne cleared her throat. "For reasons I shall go into in greater detail later, I found myself present when the Stone of Tear fell to Rand's forces. We lived in the Stone for some time after and ... Well, I was not sure when the opportunity would present itself again, or *if* it would. So ... I ... I confessed and we ... we made love, too."

Min put her fists on her hips. "That randy goat! His mother must have had viewings like mine. He despoiled you, too?"

She found herself squirming on the spot. "I wouldn't consider myself despoiled exactly ..."

"Elayne Trakand! Daughter-Heir of Andor. You liked it," Min said, scandalised. Her eyes sparkled mischievously.

“Oh shut up! I bet you did as well. I mean, he was ... It felt like ...”

As she struggled for words, her face feeling like it was about to catch fire, Min burst out laughing. She laughed so hard she was struggling to breathe. In the absence of a chair, she staggered to the nearest bed and sat there.

Elayne huffed a laugh, too, but hers was sadder. “I knew even then that he wouldn’t be mine alone. There were other women there, competing for his regard. Some more objectionable than others. I already suspected you had seen something of our future, but ...” Min’s laughter had trailed off. She was silent as Elayne went and sat beside her on the bed. “The Aiel there had some strange things to say about it all. Their marriage customs seemingly allow for, uh, multiple spouses at once.” She had to wet her lips before continuing. “A truly scandalous arrangement, but—and I’m not saying I would do such a thing, mind!—but, hypothetically, do you think that could be what your viewing meant?”

“It’s possible ...”

“Possible?”

Min looked away. Gave a timid little shrug. “My viewings always come true, Elayne. I couldn’t change it if I wanted to.”

Was it surprise that quickened her heart, or something else? “You would ... really marry me?”

Min looked at her again. Her eyes were huge dark pools that a girl could drown in. “I would marry you both, and consider it a better outcome than I dreamed possible.”

She did not need long hair or fashionable clothes or expensive jewellery to be utterly beautiful. Elayne didn’t realise she was doing it until her lips were already locked to Min’s.

Time passed and affairs confessed burned to ash, to smoke in that first touch of their lips. It did not all become new again, it became what it had always been. Them, together. It was the relief of a breath held too long and finally released. She wasn’t sure who guided them to lie down on the bed, or when Min’s shirt had come off, or if the buttons of her dress had been undone or ripped. And didn’t care. Any moment in which her lips were not touching Min was intolerable.

She was captured and bound by her own dress while wiggling out of it, but, far from taking advantage, Min helped her free herself. She helped her free herself of every last scrap of clothing, all while kissing her ardently. Elayne tried to return the favour, unbuckling her belt and pushing her trousers down over those curvaceous hips she knew so well. The boots proved a bit harder to kick free of than Elayne’s shoes, however, and they were forced to unlock their lips.

She had enough presence of mind left to hop from the bed and latch the door, but only just. Her body had responded hungrily to Min’s touch.

“Light, you’re beautiful.”

When she turned back from the door, Min was throwing off the last of her clothes. The womanly form that had hid beneath was unveiled entirely. The brown nipples upon her lovely breasts were already stiff. Her narrow waist drew the eye, and down below, between her slender legs, something else drew Elayne to her.

“I missed you so much,” she said, in the moment before she fell upon her. There was no room for words after that.

Lips and hands were everywhere. Min’s on hers, touching sensitive places, private places, even mundane places. Why did it thrill her to have her shoulder kissed? She barely even felt it, but the simple fact that it was Min kissing her made it wonderful. They fought the least violent battle of their lives, to see who could contort herself the most to kiss and please the other.

Sometime later they found themselves with their hands tangled in each other’s hair, kissing again, grinding their hips mindlessly against each other’s thighs. Fingers had not been enough but there was a way. It was well that Elayne was on top, for it let her rise up a little and press her sopping wet sex against Min’s. Their juices mingled in sweet relief. Min understood at once, and started rocking her hips.

To their sides they went, rolling and rubbing, their sweet moans mingling as well. She loved being able to see Min’s face as she lost herself to pleasure, and hoped she looked as pretty to her as she did to Elayne. Her whole body felt like it was a struck chord, quivering in joy, ready to sing its last note. She ... she couldn’t hold it.

“Min! I’m coming!”

“Do it!” she gasped. “Do it, baby! Come for me! I want to see that sexy face you make again.”

She did. Elayne shook as she came, her body continuing to rub against Min without her even telling it to. She was almost struck dumb, but not quite.

“Don’t stop. Keep fucking me for as long as you need to. I want to make you happy.”

“Light!” Min clutched Elayne’s leg to her chest as she gyrated her hips, pushing them closer and closer together in search of that perfect moment, the moment when she ... “Yes!”

For a time, all that could be heard was the sound of their laboured breathing. They lay with their legs entangled, basking in the afterglow. Even in the stillness she could feel the heat of Min’s pulse against her sex. The room was almost as bare as them, and the bed was far from comfy, but Elayne would have happily lain in that moment forever. She wondered if her face looked as dopey as Min’s, and giggled. This set Min off, too.

“I don’t think you need to worry about Rand,” Elayne said. “I’m sure if he experienced this, he would love you like I do.”

“Then why was he half way to another country by the time I woke up?”

“Because he’s a jerk?”

“Other than that.”

She really couldn’t think of an answer. “Sometimes men are put off by your choice of clothes. I always thought that, if you had put on a dress, Gawyn would have asked you to go walking with him for example. I saw him looking at you on occasion, but I think the breeches and the man’s coat put him off.”

“I dress the way I like, and I wouldn’t change for a lord, even if he is your brother. Or for Rand.” Min spoke absently; it was a conversation she had had before. “Sometimes it is useful to pass as a boy.”

“No-one who looks twice believes you are a boy.” Elayne smiled.

“I hope not.”

Elayne made her voice firm. “Put those thoughts out of your mind at once, Min. I shall help you. I’ll wager that when next you meet Rand, you will have him wrapped around your little finger.” She meant it, too. The most surprising thing was how right it felt to say it.

CHAPTER 15: Hope and Despair



Rand's hopes of keeping the chaos at the Damodred manor quiet were futile. He'd barely been back in Cairhien an hour before the visits started. Sorilea brought the Wise Ones to add to the rebukes Melaine had heaped on him while they were seeking a quiet spot in the woods from which to Travel. That she and the Goshien had to take the old fashioned way back, as they'd taken it there—even he couldn't hold a gateway open long enough for a whole army to march through—didn't spare him. The Maidens did not value his privacy at all.

Dani and ... her ... their friend came as well, to lament not having been there. Rand, his feathers already well ruffled by the Wise Ones, was not having it. The Aes Sedai would have been no more intimidated by Accepted than they were by Aviendha. Less, since they would expect the Accepted to side with them. He kept his own doubts on that matter safely hidden, but Dani bared her teeth at him anyway. She looked like she wanted to bite, but it was only hard words she hit him with that day. It wouldn't have made any difference if they'd been there, he insisted. When ... the beautiful Volsuni whose name made his skull throb, pointed out, not unreasonably, that she could at least have stopped his bleeding, he was too busy grimacing at nothing to give her a proper answer. They left in a bad mood, and he knew he should go after them, but he could not make himself rise from his seat.

The invisible intruder in his office fell blessedly silent once ... the Volsuni left. He was still there, though. Lurking. Rand had no idea how to get rid of him.

He had enough sense left to refuse all requests for audience from the nobles. If they had heard about Damodred swearing fealty and wanted to get a feel for the changing political scene, they would just have to wait. He was in no state for guests.

He was of no rank to be running to his father either, but that was what he found himself doing. Tam had refused the offer of a bigger room in the palace, accepting only a small servant's cubicle down near the kitchens. He'd stopped using his last name, too, but Rand doubted that was fooling many. Too many already knew they were related. Rand knew why he did it, but couldn't quite accept it. His craggy father greeted him with a warm hug, made him sit down on the lone stool beside a little nightstand and offered him a cup of tea. It all started well, and Rand's headache eased, but when he brought up the incident at the manor Tam set his jaw stubbornly.

"You know I shouldn't be interfering, lad. This is your life, your destiny, and I've done enough damage to it already."

"It's not interfering if I ask," Rand said, a bit exasperated. "Besides, I already came to some conclusions of my own. I just wanted to talk them over with you."

"I can listen," Tam said slowly.

"Silently?"

"Silently."

He sighed. "My head hurts. It's been hurting a lot lately. Whenever I'm around ..." He set his jaw. Theren men did not back down, especially not when their father's were watching. "Ilyena."

Why!? Why did it have to end that way!? Lews Therin shouted. Tam heard nothing, of course, and did not have to listen to the insane mutters and lamentations that overlay the rest of their talk.

"A name rarely used in this Age. You know why," Tam said quietly.

Rand told him what he would have told no-one else. "My head hurts worse any time I hear it."

His father's shoulders slumped. "There's nothing I can do to help with that. I don't know of anyone who can. All I can tell you is to hold on as long as you can, son. And once you can't ... keep going. All the way to the end."

"No matter the cost?" Rand whispered in secret horror. There were times he wondered if it might be better to let the Dark One win than do what Lews Therin had. The thought of Elayne, or Min, or Aviendha, or any of his loved ones suffering at his hands ... It was too much, too horrible.

Tam stared at him for a long time, his dark eyes stricken. The silence stretched and stretched. Eventually, Rand realised he would get no answer. He gathered his composure and rose from the stool.

"Thank you for the tea," he said as he let himself out.

He thought Tam might have whispered something just before the door closed. He thought it might have been, "The Light burn me to ash." But he could not hear properly over the sound of Lews Therin's weeping.

Wanting no further visits, he stumped off to his quarters, shucking his *Far Dareis Mai* guard by fraction the deeper he passed into and up the Tower of the Risen Sun. Even in his bedroom he found no peace. Merile was curled up on one of the sofas along the wall, napping in her nice green and black dress. Rand blew out a low breath, and sternly told himself that he would not be snappish with her no matter how he felt. The sound did not wake her, nor did his hanging up his coat, or setting Tam's ... no, *his* sword in a corner beside his unstrung bow. He poured from the pitcher and drank, and still she did not rise. Worried, he padded over.

"She sleeps the sleep of the dead, Lews Therin," an all too familiar voice chimed.

Rand snatched at *saidin*, welcoming the taint for once if it meant not being helpless before her. How had she gotten past his wards? Had Asmodean betrayed him? Lanfear stood right beside the selfsame wardrobe he'd hung his coat up in, clad in white and silver as ever, beautiful as ever, frightening as ever. "How long have you been there?" he said before he could think.

She laughed softly, teasingly. He hoped she mistook that for the reason he shivered. Her dark eyes shone. "I'm always here, my love. Everywhere you go, there I am, longing to reach out and touch you."

It might almost have been romantic. Rand had to stamp down the urge to throw a shield at her and run for the door. "Have you hurt Merile?" he demanded. *Too hot. Too hot! You know what she's like!*

Her eyes shone still, and not with affection. "Is she precious to you, the jug-eared, flat-chested shrimp? You would put her ahead of me, as you did that chit Ilyena!?"

That damned name again. *Her. Her!* Lews Therin panted, but not in lust. *Strike you fool! Before it is too late!* Rand dug deep, and found a well of hidden strength with which to silence the madman.

"Don't be ridiculous. Look at the two of you," he scoffed, outwardly stern but inwardly flinching. *I'm sorry, Merile.* "How could she, or any woman, think to compete with a survivor of the Age of Legends possessed of all your beauty and power?" Lanfear flicked from furious to feline without bothering with any of the steps between. "But she serves me as a Healer. I need someone like that around. If you've damaged her, I must wonder whether the affection you claim is genuine or not. This may have been a mistake."

"It is! None can love you like I do! You are mine, Lews Therin, and I am yours, until the day the Wheel stops turning." Her long legs closed the gap between them quickly. Against his better judgement, he allowed her outstretched hand to come to rest on his chest. He could feel its heat through his shirt. "Your comical pet is undamaged. I merely put her to sleep for a while, that we might be alone." She calmed, became sultry. Even knowing what she was, it had an effect on his body. How could a woman so flawed be so physically perfect? "It is far too difficult to arrange these trysts, my love. You are too often surrounded by irritants. We may have to cull them."

He made himself kiss her on the lips. The mere peck was enough to wash her sudden murderousness away. "It would be a poor general who culled his own troops," he said. Showing the true horror her suggestion merited would only have set her once again to wondering if he liked another woman more than her. Lanfear leaned in for a deeper kiss. He accepted it as easily as he would have a lick from a viper's tongue.

She crushed him to her bosom as though trying to fill her empty heart with his. His hand found her globular bottom of its own accord. Her lips left his, leaving him to stare into the dark pits that were her eyes. "Everything will be perfect again, once we are together."

"Aren't we already?"

She looked confused, lost. Her cheek twitched disturbingly. Rand didn't understand.

I could never have saved you, Mierin. Or washed away the guilt you run from. Lews Therin sounded almost sane for once.

Rand knew some part of her history. He had seen it through his ancestor's eyes in Rhuidean. She had been part of the experiment that opened the hole in the Dark One's prison.

"Did you know what was on the other side of the Bore?" he heard himself ask.

Lanfear was as surprised as him. “Of course I did! I am not a fool. I chose my own name, before they could give me one. Daughter of the Night. Those other wretches knew nothing. They doomed our world in their bumbling incompetence. Not I. They deserved to die for it. Not I. I will live forever in the horror I made. With you.”

While Lews Therin grumbled incoherently, the Forsaken knelt before Rand and started pulling at his belt. The sight stirred his body but his mind was still trying to make sense of all he’d heard. He found himself disbelieving her evil spiel. He found himself feeling sorry for her, and damned himself for a fool. Just because they were being intimate didn’t mean he could allow himself to feel any intimacy for this woman. She was a monster.

The monster’s maw closed around his hard cock. A heady mix of fear and pleasure made Rand’s mind reel. He let *saidin* go. Lanfear held him by the hips and looked up into his eyes as she ran her lips up and down his length, her swishing tongue stimulating each inch that passed it.

She sucked on him hungrily. Though he stood over her, and penetrated her, Rand felt strangely vulnerable. Was it the teeth? Other women had pleased him so, and he’d never felt this way. “Do you want me to fill you? Because if you keep doing that, I will.”

She didn’t listen to his warning, but pushed herself down deeper instead. He was in her throat, her softness making his cock twitch and forcing her to fight not to gag. There were tears in her eyes.

Rand put his hands to Lanfear’s face and eased her off him. He didn’t want to hurt her. He knew he should, but he was such a weak fool. Pulling her to her feet, he unbuttoned her dress and let it fall, unveiling her pale body, the huge breasts, tiny waist and rounded hips. She was not wearing any smallclothes. She had come here wanting to be fucked, and she didn’t mind it rough. He should bend her over the bed and pound her.

He knelt instead, took two handfuls of her soft bottom, and pulled her pussy to his mouth.

“Yes,” she moaned when his tongue found her. She was already very wet. She kept moaning that word each time he licked her slit. He knew he should despise himself for doing this. To kneel at a Forsaken’s feet, his unattended cock jutting between his spread knees as he pleased her with his mouth. A Forsaken! Yet he kept doing it.

She was obviously enjoying it, leaning over him slightly with her hands upon his head, mouth open, breasts shaking a little from her twitches. But it was Lanfear herself who stopped him. Taking him by the hands, she pulled him towards the sofa, pushed him down on it and climbed on top of him. His treacherous eyes slid to Merile, still sleeping soundly. It was lucky for them both that she should be so unaware of what was happening right then.

Rand’s guilt did not stop him from groaning in pleasure when Lanfear slid her forsaken pussy down the full length of his fool cock. She fell upon him. Her efforts to rise were futile, for always that sinful desire pulled her back down. Up and down, back and forth, around and around, Lanfear worked those beautiful hips of hers energetically. He couldn’t understand her desire to please him, to have him for herself. She couldn’t really think we would love her, or marry her. What did she want from him?

Her huge breasts shook hypnotically as she rode. He was busy squeezing her butt, too fascinated by the way her rocking hips pressed the soft flesh against his fingers. Too busy to squeeze her breasts as well, much as he wanted to. Perhaps she saw it in him, for Lanfear took one of those breasts in hand and offered it to his mouth. He closed his lips around her engorged nipple and sucked. She wrapped her arms around his head, trapping him against her breast as she rode, and he did nothing to stop her.

It was wrong for so many reasons. She was a Forsaken. Merile was right there, innocent Merile, who loved him despite his many flaws. And Lanfear ... Mierin. The madwoman in his arms. It wasn’t sex she wanted. As beautiful as she was, she could have almost any man in the world. Or men, for that matter! What he suspected she wanted, deep down where she wouldn’t even admit it to herself, was something he could not give her.

She broke herself. As I did. Light help me, as I did ... Lews Therin’s voice trailed off, replaced by the sound of quiet weeping.

How mad, to climax with such a sound for a backdrop. How fitting. He released Lanfear’s nipple just before he released his seed into her womb. Rand groaned, partially in despair as he came. The sound made her smile. “Yeess. Fill me ...” she whispered. Her hips kept moving, and she was not shy about playing with herself in front of him. The Forsaken’s fingers flew to her sex. She rubbed herself furiously, eager to reach her own climax before his hardness left him.

He took her breasts in hand and kneaded them to help speed her on her way. Stimulated in so many different ways, Lanfear was reduced to a panting mess of incipient orgasm. When said orgasm finally arrived, she screamed so loudly that he found himself looking guiltily from Merile, who still slept, to the door, from which no alarmed guards emerged.

He sat there afterwards, still plugging her hole, but starting to shrink. He bathed in a familiar lassitude, and a feeling of dirtiness that was not as unfamiliar as it should be. He tried to tell himself that he'd only done what he needed to, to keep her cooperative and maintain their alliance. It didn't matter how good it had felt.

Those weren't the only thoughts that troubled him, though. What Nynaeve had told him of the meeting she witnessed had been interesting.

"You've probably noticed, but I'm moving armies back south. Sammael has been taking jabs at me. I mean to make him regret it. Can you tell me anything about him? What would be the best way to defeat him, one on one?"

She climbed off his lap and went to recover her dress. He refused to be so distracted by the way her bottom moved as she walked that he missed the fact that she had hid her face from him. Not that that was easy. The way she bent to pick it up, and then wiggled into her dress ... it did things.

When she faced him once more, she was about as composed as someone could be after doing what they'd done. Rand hastily tucked himself back into his breeches. She spoke calmly.

"An alliance of the Chosen plots to bring you low, Lews Therin. Sammael is to be their bait. When you move against him, you will find Rahvin, Graendal and Balthamel lurking in ambush. You would be unwise to attack him now."

"I see. No wonder he didn't stay to fight. He was provoking me," Rand said, just as calmly. "Thank you for telling me."

She didn't seem to see how surprised he was. "You would be lost without me. You know it."

His commitment to deception did not stretch far enough to say that. But he could make her an offer she was unlikely to accept. "Will you stay the night?"

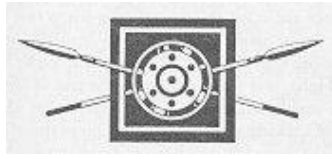
Lanfear shook her head at once. "The other Chosen cannot know that we are together once more, Lews Therin. Not until we are ready to rule this world as husband and wife. Continue to do as you have done. I will come for you again."

His lips twitched. "Hopefully as loudly next time."

Lanfear laughed openly. So strange. When she did that she almost seemed like a real person instead of a monster out of legend. "Until then," she said, as she opened a gateway there in his room. As usual, he did not recognise the marbled palace into which she stepped.

Rand let his head loll back on the sofa as soon as she was gone. He felt drained, and not just of life's juices. He wasn't sure how many more of these encounters he could survive.

CHAPTER 16: Temptation



The sun had almost set by the time Merile woke up. Though worried sick, Rand had not dared carry her off to one of the female channelers to be examined. If they detected what Lanfear had done, they would ask questions he could not answer. So he shook and patted her as gently as he could, and paced the room in a tizzy when that didn't work. He cleaned up, washed, dressed, relieved himself, and then sat around and brooded. It was a struggle to hide his relief when she sat up looking confused.

"Uh oh. Looks like I was being a lazy bones again."

"That's fine. But there was something I wanted you to help me with," he said, a bit too hastily. "It has to do with the Wise Ones. Uh, and the Way of the Leaf."

She rubbed sleep and surprise from her eyes. "Oh. I don't think they like talking to me about that. Are you sure?"

"They're tough women; they can stand a bit of scandal." Within limits. If he took her to the tents, where channelling Wise Ones were a fairly common sight, any One Power related discrepancies were likely to be attributed to one of them. Or maybe the Accepted. Pretty nasty of him to sow distrust among his allies, but better that than allow what he'd been doing with Lanfear to be discovered, or to allow Merile to go untreated.

Pride fills me. I am sick with the pride that destroyed me!

Pride? What pride? I abandoned hope of pride a long time ago. And perhaps hope of sanity along with it. Talking to a voice in his head. He shook it off and set out to do as he'd planned.

He had thought to ride Jeade'en out to the camp, but the Wise Ones who'd come to lecture him earlier were still in the palace he found, as he and his escort of Maidens were on their way to the stables.

"Are you sure you aren't ill? I think you should get one to examine you just in case," he told Merile.

"I feel fine. And I don't like to bother them, but ..."

Rand missed a step. The sight ahead made him swallow what he had been going to say and stop dead. Because of the summer heat the doors stood open, giving out into one of the Palace gardens. The flowers were gone, and some of the rose and whitestar bushes looked wilted, but the shade trees still stood, if with few leaves, around the white marble fountain that splashed in the garden's heart. A woman in bulky brown wool skirts and a loose white *algode* blouse stood beside the fountain, a grey shawl looped over her arms, staring in wonder as she often did at water with no use except to be looked at. Rand's eyes drank in the lines of Aviendha's face, the waves of reddish hair falling to her shoulders from the folded grey scarf fastened around her temples. Light but she was beautiful. Studying the spray of water, she had not seen him yet.

Did he love her? He did not know. She was all tangled in his head and his dreams with Elayne and Min. What he did know was that he was dangerous and twisted; he had nothing to offer any woman except pain.

Ilyena, Lews Therin wept. I killed her! The Light consume me forever!

"We'll look for a Wise One who can heal," Rand said quietly. "No sense stopping to chat." Almost everyone stopped when he did, but Enaila and Jalani exchanged glances and kept on right past him toward the garden. He raised his voice a fraction and hardened it considerably more. "The Maidens here will come with me. Anyone who wants to put on a dress and discuss matchmaking can stay behind."

Enaila and Jalani stiffened and spun to face him, indignation lighting their eyes. A good thing Somara was not in this evening's guard; she might have gone on anyway. Sulin's fingers flashed in Maiden handtalk, and whatever she had to say, it quenched indignation and set embarrassed flames in the two Maidens' cheeks instead.

Ignoring the questions from Nici, Pamela and the other Maidens, he hastened off in search of a Wise One he could use to obscure his trail.

Aca trotted to keep pace with him while the other Maidens fell behind. "Tam likes her," she told him. She didn't look away when Rand glared. That she was sleeping with his father was one thing, but how dare she act all ... mother-like! She hadn't gone off with Enaila admittedly, and she'd lowered her voice when speaking, but ... He ground his teeth. How dare she be nice! Was it too much to ask that he could hate a woman who was muscling in and shoving him aside?

"It's complicated," he muttered. His whole life was.

"It often is, with the men of your family," she said quietly.

"Do not dare ask me for advice," he hissed.

Aca's eyes widened in surprise, though she showed little other reaction. "You do not approve."

Rand's eyes widened as well, and he did a much worse job of hiding the rest. There it was, stated directly. Suddenly, he felt petty and small. Child-like. So what if Tam had found another woman? He deserved it. "Don't mind me," he sighed. "I'm acting like a jealous child, and I know it."

"I did not expect that," she said. "Complicated indeed."

They found the Wise Ones in an open courtyard, talking with Rhuarc. They were not unguarded, of course. Aiel sentries greeted him with honour. If they knew what an honourless schemer he was, they'd likely have spit. If people knew the half of what he had done, they would be disgusted.

He stopped at a distance again, searching for someone who would suit his purpose. Not Sorilea, that was for sure. She was far too suspicious. The dreamwalkers knew him better than the rest, but that just meant they'd trust him least of all. None of these women were easily fooled, but his aunt Dana and Aeron of the Nakai had spoken favourably of him. Perhaps they could help, albeit unwittingly.

"Why are you avoiding Aviendha?" Nici asked. Slender and pretty, she stood close but spoke so low it was still a struggle to hear.

"I'm not. I just ... didn't feel like talking," he whispered.

Uncommonly dark eyes regarded him speculatively. "You are not getting along? I mean, it does not change the way I feel about you if you are. I am just curious."

"Nothing's changed. We get along as well as we always have." Which wasn't saying much. He knew he should stop but kept whispering anyway. "Nothing has changed about the way I feel about you either. Or ever will."

Nici showed no reaction but that didn't mean anything. Aiel were good at hiding their feelings, and feelings of that kind between him and a Maiden were forbidden now. Rand returned his attention to the Wise One gathering and spotted someone he could drop Merile off with.

Estair was a slender, red-haired girl about his age. Heavily freckled and not one for smiling. More importantly, she was Aeron's apprentice. She folded her hands at the small of her back and stood straight when she saw him striding towards her. "I see you, *Car'a'carn*."

It went smoothly with her. She was dubious when he claimed Merile wanted to talk to them about the Way but did not argue. His claim that he worried she might be a bit ill was accepted with serious grey eyes. Hopefully she would see things taken care of, once Aeron and the rest were done with their talk.

He sought out Rhuarc then, to further cover his tracks. Of a height with Rand, and maturely handsome, he eyed him knowingly as he approached. "I have heard that there was trouble at the sept of the Treekiller."

It was calmly said. Rand heard the rebuke even so. What else could be found at such a place, he said without saying? "Trouble follows me everywhere. But it worked out well in the end."

"This time."

He sighed. "This time." Merile was chatting away to Estair, who looked unsure of how to deal with her. He saw her set off towards a group of her fellow apprentices. From them to the Wise Ones, and no need to suspect a sex-crazed Forsaken had been anywhere near her. It was time for him to go. "The Treekillers swore the same oaths the others did," he said, strolling by and gesturing for Rhuarc to join him.

"Honour should call on them to keep those oaths," said Rhuarc. Rand heard it again.

"They weren't the real problem anyway. It was the Aes Sedai who were staying with them."

The chief grunted, and looked to Amys and the other channelling Wise Ones. "Young men tend to take risks, for pride's sake. This causes many pains. For them as well." Amys noticed her husband looking and gave him a solemn nod without pausing her discussion.

Pride again. Why did people think him proud? He and Rhuarc exited the courtyard while Rand brooded in silence. They were well clear of the courtyard, trailed by Maidens and the pair of Red Shields who escorted Rhuarc, when Rand's conscience bade him speak. "I don't mean to do it. Cause pain."

"I know this," Rhuarc said quietly. He accompanied Rand all the back to his tower, where they shed their escorts.

Only when they were alone did Rand feel free to ask what he hadn't been able to ask of Tam. "It happens too often. Causing pain. I worry sometimes that the madness might be working on me already. I sometimes think it would be better if I died before it takes me completely."

Rhuarc put a hard hand on his shoulder. "I would not be. Hear me, Rand al'Thor. If your death would prevent the doom of our people, I would kill you myself," said the man who had been friend, mentor and more to him. He saw the truth in Rand's eyes. "I do not speak to cause pain. If such a prophecy spoke of me, I would expect you to do the same. Or Amys or Lian. My own children even. It would not prevent anything, however. You cannot die. No matter how much pain you cause, to yourself or others, you must dream on."

It was only a confirmation of what Rand already knew, when the doubts were not preying on him. To save the world from the Shadow, he would have to turn himself into a monster. "I will do what I must," he said wearily.

"You are a good boy."

"Am I?"

Rhuarc touched his cheek. It surprised him but he did not recoil. There was warmth in the chief's look. A warmth that he knew could become heat if he let it. "A very good boy ..."

Rand bit his lip. He could be, for Rhuarc. Lanfear had left him thoroughly drained but it was not as if that would be a problem here. He wanted to be good ...

It was Rand who kissed him first, hard lips vying to see who was harder, but it was Rhuarc who pushed him towards the door to his bedroom. The question of who was harder had already been answered by the time they staggered inside, still locked in an impassioned embrace, tugging at each other's clothes. Rhuarc's erection was pressing up against Rand's still flaccid crotch. Being in that state did not mean he was any less excited but it gave the other man pause.

"Do you want this?" he asked. "No shame to stop."

"I want this," Rand confessed.

The gasp was very soft, but more than enough to make Rand jump. He was down to his breeches by then. Rhuarc was wearing even less, his muscular body and jutting cock bared as befit a private place, where they could be alone.

They were not alone, however. Aviendha had already returned to Rand's chamber, her fascination with fountains forgotten. She was lying on a pallet underneath one of the windows, the moonlight sneaking in to perfectly light the features of her shocked face. She said nothing. Rand could not form words. Only Rhuarc could speak and all he saw fit to say was, "Amys knows." Then he went right back to kissing Rand's neck from behind and caressing the hard ridges of his stomach.

Rand's heart was pounding like a racehorse's and not simply from excitement. There was no way he could unring this bell. She now knew something about him that almost no woman did. Her eyes were huge. He didn't think he saw scorn there, but how could he know? When Rhuarc pushed down his breeches and exposed him, those huge eyes dipped low for a brief moment, before Aviendha jerked up the covers and hid her face from them.

There would be no hiding what they did if he went along with what Rhuarc still wanted. The thought made him squirm.

"I love the way you wiggle. It will be even better when I am in you," Rhuarc whispered.

Light! She heard that. She might not be looking but she would hear everything that happened, and perhaps picture it in her mind. He could still stop this. Push Rhuarc away. Tell the man who had confessed to his wives their affair and asked their permission to continue that it was too embarrassing to be seen with him.

Rand's cheeks were blazing. But he did not resist when Rhuarc pushed him towards the bed. He even bent at the foot of it to free himself of the last of his clothes. His thoughts were reeling so much that he forgot to use *saidin* to slicken himself as he usually did. So when Rhuarc took him by the hip and penetrated him, he was unable to contain his voice.

It hurt, but it hurt in a good way. For the other man as well. "Such a tight little ass you have," he sighed as he went in raw.

He gripped Rhuarc with it as he went down onto the bed and, whether it was truly tight enough or the chief simply couldn't bear to leave him, he came down with him. Rand found himself cradled between the cool silk sheets and the equally silken heat of the skin of the man atop him.

His self-discipline was far too shaken not to make soft noises as Rhuarc fucked him. He wiggled as promised. Only partially so he could climb further up the bed and grab a pillow with which to smother his shame. Rhuarc never left him.

Rand clutched the pillow to his cheek as Rhuarc made fierce love to him. The cock that pounded into him was deliciously hot, that enticing mixture of hardness and tenderness that so suited the man it belonged to. The bed was so soft that that each slap of the chief's hips against his made it feel as if Rand was being caressed from front and back. His soft cock was being rubbed against the sheets, and threatened to stir once more. The heavy breathing coming from behind was a telltale sign of how much Rhuarc craved release.

What tale the heavy breathing of the young woman in the room told was a much greater mystery. Aviendha was never far from Rand's side nowadays. She denied she loved him, had claimed to outright hate Rand in fact. Yet she would not leave him either.

Had she peeked from beneath her covers? Did she watch even now, as the older man buggered Rand and Rand writhed in pleasure to be so used? Was she touching herself? He recalled the sight of her naked upon the snow. Once and once only had she let him lie with her, and for a brief time he had known joy. She was impressively fit he knew. The muscles of her stomach as clearly defined as Rand's own, though leaner. Her flesh was pale white where the harsh sun of the Aiel Waste never touched it, and the hair that crowned her sex was a dark red, almost like blood. Virgin's blood, as she had shed for him, this woman who claimed to feel nothing but hate. He imagined her hand sliding down over the shallow hills of her stomach, cupping the hairy mound in her palm, a finger stealing between her lips to taste the sweet heat he remembered so well ... a tortured moan escaped his lips.

Rhuarc chuckled at the sound. He planted a kiss upon the Rand's back and ran one hand through his tangled red hair. "It feels good to be appreciated," he rumbled.

"I'm happy to show it," Rand gasped. His bottom was so sensitive. Having it fucked like that made it hard to think clearly. He'd been reluctant to let it start. Now he was reluctant to let it end.

He didn't have much say in that, however. Rhuarc's thrusts became quicker and shallower, familiar sign of his imminent climax. He sucked in a sharp breath, tightened his grip upon Rand's hair and buried himself to the hilt in his young lover. Rand felt him spurting inside, and sighed, enjoying the sensation.

When his orgasm had run its course, Rhuarc collapsed upon Rand's back, the weight of his muscle and warmth far from unpleasant. No complaint needed be voiced to make Rhuarc roll off, however. They embraced, chest to chest this time, as their hearts slowly returned to a natural rhythm. Rand was happy to be so cradled in his strong arms. He allowed himself to relax, an all-too rare feeling these days.

"It is unlike you not to be hard," Rhuarc said when his questing hand discovered Rand's state.

He had thought himself gorged beyond the limit of further embarrassment, but it turned out there was still room for a little more. "It has been a long day," he explained.

Rhuarc did not judge, or get offended. "It happens."

He lingered a little longer, just to make sure Rand knew he was not leaving in a huff, and then clambered off his bed. Rand watched him dress in the moonlight, standing right where they'd been when they realised Aviendha had decided to stay the night. He was very good-looking for his age. If he'd stayed just a little longer, he might have restored Rand to working order.

Rhuarc paused at the door to Rand's bedchamber. "Sleep well and wake, Rand al'Thor," he said, and slipped out.

He found himself alone in the dark with Aviendha. His hole stung and he could feel the come in there, but he might have slept anyway if his mind wasn't racing so. She already hadn't thought much of him. Had this made it worse? He didn't dare ask. Besides, she could be sleeping. There was no reason to think she was lying there staring at the dark roof like him. He felt far too hot for covers, for any number of reasons. It was nearly the end of Choren but the summer's heat had lingered this year.

It was probably nothing. The weather could be strange at times. Probably nothing. He lay in the dark, hands behind his head and brooded. It occurred to him that he never seemed to go long between broods these days. If it wasn't the Shadow, or the Aes Sedai, or the governing of nations, it was his various lovers. Perhaps the most exasperating of whom was right there with him. He sighed deeply and turned over, trying to get to sleep.

"I think Elayne would approve." Aviendha's whispered voice stopped him cold, just as surely as a raised weapon would have.

A startled laugh escaped his lips. "I sincerely doubt that," he drawled. "Then again, I never could tell what that girl was thinking."

Any other woman would have sniffed at that, but not Aviendha. "You cannot tell what I am thinking either," she announced, matter-of-factly.

"Then that's something you two have in common."

"There will be others things," Aviendha added. "There has to be." That last was said so low he wasn't sure he heard her right.

"Do *you* approve?" Rand asked, his voice even quieter than hers had been. He didn't really think she would hear, but Aviendha had the ears of a she-wolf.

"Such things are not spoken of, Rand al'Thor," she whispered, "but there is no dishonour in them. What would I disapprove of?"

Rand shook his head. The more he came to know the Aiel, the less he seemed to understand them. He knew he should let the topic die but something compelled him to argue with her. One obvious retort came to mind. "Well, what if you and I ... you know. Like that. Don't you think Elayne would disapprove? What's the difference?" He blushed in the darkness, and couldn't help but bite his lip. *Light, I can't believe I just said that.* He was glad she no longer carried a spear.

Aviendha was silent for a long time. Rand could hear his own heart beating fast as he waited for her to speak. "Such things are known to happen in the men's sweat tents," the Aiel girl said at last, her voice low, the words strangely drawn out, as though she was still trying to puzzle out her answer. "Amys and others know of it, and do not object to their husbands. This must mean it does not incur *toh*, or cost any *ji*."

Rand sat up in bed and stared down at the pallet where she lay, the moonlight was not strong enough to pierce the shadows that hid her from him, but he imagined he could feel her looking back at him. "Have you ever ...?"

"Of course not!" she snapped. "You of all people should know this."

Rand nodded. For all her beauty, Aviendha had been a virgin the one and only time she had allowed him to touch her. Clumsy, impassioned, sweet and tender. And then gone. "Do you want to try it?" he asked softly.

"I do not," Aviendha said firmly ... or tried to. Her voice was strangely reedy all of a sudden. She cleared her throat. "Go to sleep, Rand al'Thor."

"Oh," said Rand, disappointed. He lay back down. "Sleep well and wake, Aviendha."

Sleep continued to elude Rand, however. He tossed and turned, his thoughts jumbled. And the familiar lullaby of Aviendha's breathing never came. She was quiet as a cat when she was awake, he knew. So quiet in fact, that when a strange hand touched his shoulder, Rand drew in a sharp breath. He turned to find Aviendha standing over him, her naked body silvered in the moonlight. Full-breasted and wide-hipped, Aviendha had a lean and powerful look to her that never failed to impress him. The Light caressed the strong muscles on her arms and her long legs, danced across the slight hills that rose from her hard stomach, and shone upon one side of her beautiful face and the uncertainty that she showed so rarely. For a mad moment, Rand hated the moon that could touch her freely while he was forbidden.

Aviendha's voice was a mouse's whisper. "If you promise not to touch my ..." she glanced away, searching for words. "My woman parts, then I think it would be acceptable. Perhaps. If you want to, that is. I did not ask it!" That last she delivered in a much fiercer tone.

Rand sat up quickly. "I do; want it I mean. And of course you didn't ask it. And of course I promise not to do anything you don't want me to." He was already painfully hard.

"Good," Aviendha whispered. As she twisted to sit, Rand was treated to a brief sight of her toned and rounded cheeks. He swallowed loudly, his throat suddenly dry. As Aviendha settled herself in the bed, Rand leaned over to kiss her lips, but the former Maiden eluded him and two raised fingers

soon halted his attack. “None of that,” she said, almost apologetically. “It is too much like the other, you understand.”

Rand sighed. “You are such a strange girl, Aviendha.”

Her hand skipped lightly across his arms and chest before some impulse drove her to snatch it away. She clasped her hands together before her breast, his fierce, sweet, frightening, beautiful Aiel girl.

“Turn over,” Rand whispered. With a shuddering breath, Aviendha complied.

He seized *saidin* long enough to slicken his hands and erect cock, then tossed the Source away to focus on something better.

She shivered as his fingers trailed down her back and over her lovely buttocks. Gasp as they discovered her hidden entrance and, with light, oily strokes, began to tease it open. One finger slipped within, then a second joined it and together they scouted the way. Aviendha lay on her belly upon the silken sheets, pulse racing, as Rand knelt behind her. “Spread your legs a little further,” he urged her softly, and she spread her legs seemingly without conscious thought.

Soon Rand lowered himself to lay behind Aviendha and took hold of his engorged manhood, aiming it at her tight bottom. Aviendha let out a surprising whimper as she felt him press up against her. He was on the verge of trying to reassure her that any pain would pass, when he realised that no amount of anticipated pain would draw such a sound from her brave lips. Rand kissed her between her shoulder blades and pressed himself forward.

They gasped as one when the head of his cock slipped past her defence and into her hot body. Rand hugged Aviendha tightly and moaned her name aloud. With his arms wrapped around her chest and her back pressed against him, he would feel the swift beating of her heart. His shortened breath matched hers as he pushed farther in. He went slowly, each gentle sway of his hips pushing a little more of him into her. Moving steadily, he savoured every part of her and every moment of that new joining. Soon enough Rand’s entire length was buried inside Aviendha once more. He let out a long sigh of satisfaction. “So good, Aviendha,” he whispered. “I love being inside you.”

Aviendha did not reply except to bury her face in the pillow, both hands clutching at the sheets of Rand’s bed. Rand kissed her strong shoulders some more as he began to slowly ride her. The shoulder might be all she gave him, but at least it wasn’t cold.

He held Aviendha tightly as he fucked her ass, his hands clutched at her breasts but she did not object and her nipples were hard and hot against his branded palms. A soft moan escaped her, a breath shuddered out, another was gasped in. The sounds were intoxicating to Rand’s ears. *She likes it*, he thought, *she likes me*. He wanted desperately to reach a hand down to the slit between her legs and stroke her until she cried out his name, but he had promised he wouldn’t, so instead he just held her tighter and rode her harder.

Again and again Rand thrust into Aviendha. Short slow strokes gave way to long hard ones as his passion got the better of him. She didn’t seem to mind when he increased the pace and fervour of his fucking; instead she gripped the sheets in tight fists and fought to contain her moans. One hand began to steal down towards her crotch, but instead Aviendha let out a shuddering breath, pulled the pillow to her cheek and determinedly held on.

Aviendha’s tight asshole caressed every inch of Rand’s cock and sent waves of pleasure through his body. Her lovely cheeks shivered in the moonlight with each slap of his hips. He lost track of time, his mind full of his Aiel lover and the desire to be with her as long as he could. So it took him by surprise when Aviendha thrust her hips back against his for the first time and cried out sharply. The sweet sound of her voice cut off all too soon when she clamped her hands over her mouth; the muscles of her ass clamped down on Rand’s manhood, demanding a tribute he could not deny.

“Aviendha,” Rand gasped as he came inside her. They moved in tandem now, Aviendha grinding herself against Rand, her reticence washed away by the pleasure shooting through her. A long sweet moment without pain or duty or uncertainty passed, and then, all too soon, it ended.

Rand eased himself onto his side on the soft bed, pulling Aviendha with him. He wanted to stay inside her as long as he could. Breathing heavily, he cradled her to his chest.

She elbowed him in the ribs.

“Let me go,” she said, and the pain in her voice hit him much harder than her elbow.

He released her at once, of course, and slid out of her body. “Did I hurt you? I’m so sorry. I was trying to be gentle.”

“Your insults cannot shame me. I have shamed myself far more,” she sobbed. Sobbed! He reached for her, instinctually wanting to pull her to his chest, but stopped himself in time. Not only did she not want to be touched, she would not want him to see her tears. “I thought it would be different. I did not expect to ... Now my *toh* is doubled.”

Aviendha climbed from his bed, still hiding her face from him as best she could. “Do not try to touch me again, Rand al’Thor. Please.” It wasn’t just a polite request. She was begging. “One of us must act with honour, and I have twice failed to control myself around you.”

“I won’t. I swear,” he said. Moments ago he had been revelling in her body, and he would have loved to do it again, but his answer came at once even so. That he could hurt her even when at his most loving was all his fears come true.

They slept in separate beds that night, but before sleep claimed either, they spent a long time lying in their shared misery.

CHAPTER 17: Conservation



The cider went down hard. That was fitting. It was good Theren cider, after all. It did go down, though. No amount of stubbornness could make you invincible. Anna al'Tolan set the cup aside and rested her head on the polished wooden bar. It felt like she was going down, too.

Nothing new there. The past five months had been rough. She'd travelled with *ta'veren* for so long that she'd gotten used to the bizarre coincidences and unlikely changes of mind that occurred around them. She'd come to take them for granted, she now realised, and even decided that they were good things.

They were only good things until you found yourself on the receiving end of them. How many times had she spent a week's worth of visits talking someone around to her way of thinking, only for Perrin to undo it all with a few words? All her carefully composed arguments undone with a casual comment about Faile being a good person and meaning well. Blood and ashes! That wasn't even an argument! Anna was a good person, too, and meant well. That wasn't even close to being the issue!

There had been times she'd thought she would go mad. Hana al'Caar. Her daughter Jerilin was a friend but Anna had once found herself fantasizing about throttling her friend's mother with her own braid. How many times had she gone back and forth between lauding the good Theren traditions of voting for leaders, and claiming they should all be loyal to their highborn saviour?

At least the effect seemed to be localised. Here in Emond's Field was where all the changes were happening. With some few exceptions, the folk of Watch Hill pretty much worshipped "Lady" Faile. She had made them the heroes who dealt the decisive blow against the Trolloc horde last spring, and that made her someone deserving of a statue in the village square. Possibly literally. Sasha said she'd heard talk of it the last time she'd visited home. Down in Deven Ride, however, the old ways remained set in stubborn stone.

Well, mostly. The old ways hadn't included archery as a proper pastime for women, but it was fast becoming so. Even *ta'veren* hadn't been able to stop that. The Mayor of Deven Ride was an impressive woman named Elinor al'Quiote. Stern, with a razor sharp mind. She had been quick to join Anna's archery classes in the aftermath of the Battle of Emond's Field, and once she did it most of the women of her village soon followed. Like braided, dress-wearing soldiers, zealously loyal to their general, they were. It had been a shock to find out that Elinor was no more than a baker.

Of course, duty had called her back to Deven Ride eventually. She'd left with a vow to continue the training down her way. But she'd also left Anna to labour on with only her distant support and the advice she'd given. It hadn't been easy. What ever was?

The regular staccato squeak of metal made Anna raise her head from the bar to wearily watch Emi Aybara bounce by. She'd gotten good at moving about on those contraptions Perrin had forged for her. Two curved metal "feet" attached to the bottom of padded cups in which the stumps of her severed legs could rest. She'd been as incredulous as Anna and Sara when he first brought them to show his crippled cousin, and her learning to move in them had not been fun for any of them, but now she got about the village at least as well as those of them with actual legs. The wheeled chair he'd had made for her rarely even saw any use.

"I'm out of cider," Anna told her.

Emi eyed her shrewdly. "Don't you think you've had enough, missy?"

"No. I don't think anyone could have enough tonight."

She laughed. "Oh, don't be so dramatic. It was just a little election. Perrin was happy with the results."

"Good for him," she said gruffly. Perrin had been having a grand time with his bride. They'd moved into their new mansion not long ago, and whispered rumour from those who should know better than to spread such claimed they been marking every room of it as theirs. Calle Coplin had waggled her eyebrows at Anna when reporting that. That Anna hadn't rebuked her like she deserved had been the real cause of her sighs, and not jealousy as Calle implied. Perrin deserved all the

happiness he could get. And Anna ... she needed all the support *she* could get. Even from people who got on her nerves.

Emi had bounced around to her spot behind the bar by then. She took Anna's cup and held it to one of the tapped casks. "This one's on the house, just 'cause I like you so much," she said with a grin as she handed it over.

Anna snorted softly. She limited herself to a sip this time, while folk came to compete for Emi's attention now that she was back behind the bar. Anna knew almost all of them by name now. The cause she'd taken up had forced her be more sociable than she liked. And this was the result. She sipped again. Tief Ahan was smiling as he ordered a drink. A rare sight these days. She couldn't recall seeing him smile since that time he tried to shoot Rand, but he was smiling now. Mat's dad Abell looked pleased, too, and Sandi Lewin was accepting the gift of a drink from a much younger man.

Anna's eyes slid to Paet Crawe, off sharing one of the round tables with Rowan Hurn, Jon al'Vere and other men of his age. Paet had lost his wife and his youngest son in the fighting and had put his support behind Anna early on. She'd found her thoughts straying to places she'd never expected them to stray as the months wore on. She tried to shrug it off as her having gotten used to male company and lamenting the recent lack but, being the daughter of a single father herself, the implications had made her cringe. Paet wasn't the only unhappy man there. Cenn Buie looked as sour as ever, of course. He was another one whose support she'd found herself reluctantly welcoming. And Jon al'Vere certainly wasn't celebrating his sister's ousting as Mayor.

Out past the window the men sat by, lights could be seen in the windows of the Winespring Inn, off on the other side of the small river from which it took its name. She wondered what kind of crowd they had there tonight.

That comparison, and competition, had set in fast once construction of The Archers had been finished. The newness of the place had drawn the curious and the fashionable, while the familiar smells of Marin's fine cooking ensured that the Winespring Inn was never without custom of its own. The contradiction wasn't lost on her. She saw it in the rowdy crowd drinking here tonight, just as she saw it in the way the women who'd taken up the bow had come to look down on those who did not. Wimpy, they called them. In a Theren that had twice endured attacks from Trolloc hordes in recent years, wimpy was not a word any woman liked to have associated with her. Nothing had been done when the men were watching, but Anna knew for a fact that several clumps of hair had been lost over that word.

These were mad times all over. Here she was, fighting to prevent an incipient aristocracy from taking root in her homeland, fighting to preserve their traditions. While also upending several of those traditions herself. Downing the last of her cider, she got down from the stool and made room at the bar. Though short, and dressed more like a boy than a girl here in the matriarchal Theren, she had no difficulty getting through the crowd. Even the dancers paused long enough to let her pass.

It was her bar, after all.

Crossed Theren longbows were mounted on the walls. Trolloc skulls hung above the fireplaces. The few merchants who'd visited in the time since her grand opening had all asked what kind of animals the skulls came from. And had all been satisfyingly shocked by her answer. She stored working bows and arrows aplenty at her place, right alongside the food and drink. The Archers had been born in the aftermath of war, and its stern stone walls showed it.

It wasn't all warlike, though. She was not so foolish that she would make the seats anything less than cloud-soft. You didn't need to have ridden across a continent to appreciate the value of a soft seat, but Anna had, and it certainly helped. She had extra rooms beside this main one, too. A brighter, more womanly area where no skulls could be seen, and the smallest room, with its own fire, where the smokers could sit apart from the rest. There were enough rooms upstairs that she could have rented beds as well but she wasn't sure if she wanted to do that. For now, the rooms housed those women who'd come from the other towns or distant farms to practice archery with her and her girls. All told, she was quite proud of her new place.

It had cost her almost all the money she'd made from selling her family's farm and land.

She got more than her share of greetings and raised cups, nods, jokes and clapped shoulders as she wended her way through the crowd. She tried to return all, no matter how hard it was in the circumstances.

Most of the customers in the places like this that she'd been to during her travels had tended to be male. Not so here. A lot of her archers were regulars at The Archers. She'd been quick to make room for tea and juice upon realising that, though she was still trying to find a cook who could rival Marin al'Vere. Sasha was filling in now. She'd come from Watch Hill for training and then stuck around. Nice girl. Good shot. But it sometimes seemed that only half the food was making it from the kitchen to the customers. Anna had been well aware of the effect having such a large female customer base would have. Said effect was well on its way to replacing all the money she'd spent fixing the place up. More importantly, it had given her a great spot from which to push her views.

Even now she saw a pair of hunting brothers from down Deven Ride way trying their luck with a pair of sisters from Taren Ferry. Mags and Beff were among the few survivors of that village. The only easy way into the Theren, Taren Ferry had been hit early and hit hard. Merl and Darl were a rough pair but Anna thought the girls could do a lot worse. And since they were eager for sanctuary from the world outside, Deven Ride was the place to go.

Near the door to the smoker's room, Tell Lewin was leaning against a wall and over Cilia Cole, who was giggling over something. Anna approved. Between his skinniness and her plumpness, they might make a regular shaped baby.

And Wil al'Seen was here, of course, surrounded by the young and the gullible. He'd actually tried his smile on her a few months back, something he'd never done in all the years she'd known him before. Perhaps she should have taken it as a compliment, a sign that she'd come up in the world. Instead she'd taken it as a test of her diplomacy skills, one she'd passed by not smacking him so hard he spun around thrice.

An even bigger test occurred when a hand unexpectedly touched her butt as she was nearing the stairs. It was just Sara, though. The scar she'd picked up in the fighting made her shy of her smile, slanting as it did across her left cheek towards her mouth, but she smiled at Anna's reaction.

"You look like a woman who needs to relax," she said.

"If I drink any more, I'll pass out. Would that be relaxed enough?"

"Too relaxed. But perhaps still not relaxed enough ..." The lean woman had not always been so bold. As experienced as Anna when it came to shooting, she had taught many of the classes from the start, when Anna was too busy. She had crushed hard on Emi, too, something Anna had noticed long before Emi did.

Emi being Emi, invulnerable to shyness now, there hadn't been much of a gap between her noticing and things happening. Anna had never really thought of herself as being into girls, but she was into friends. And some friends were more fun than others ...

"Emi looks a bit busy, but perhaps later tonight the three of us could," she cleared her throat, "relax together."

Sara's smile widened. "Last time was a lot of fun." They'd made a triangle, on their sides, her mouth against Emi's sex, Emi's against Sara's, Sara's against hers. Fun indeed.

Anna dimpled a smile of her own. "It was."

"Where is she?" a woman's voice demanded. She knew it well.

So did Sara. "She's back," she said. She sighed, but longingly. Alycia al'Quiote seemed to have that effect on a lot of people. Beautiful, with huge brown eyes, a narrow waist and a ridiculously big bust, she wended her way through the crowd with an unnecessary politeness. People tended to move for the Mayor of Deven Ride's eldest daughter. People tended to do a lot, boys and girls alike, in hopes of winning a smile from her. The two trailing her now certainly would. Dalla Wyatt and Nat al'Ban looked similar enough that you might assume them brother and sister, though they weren't related at all. When Dalla wasn't rushing to do any chore that dared present itself before Alycia, or Nat wasn't trying to impress her with his latest song, they spent most of their time glaring jealously at each other.

Alycia noticed precisely none of that. She noticed Anna, though, and grinned. Anna grinned back. The two of them had clicked from the start, and she knew why. Alycia was one of those hard-working, goal-oriented types, blessed with looks they didn't value, whose effect they didn't realise. A certain neighbour of hers had been just like that, too.

"So how does it feel? All your work came down to this."

Anna put her hands on her hips. "It's a bit hard to process." She kept her voice low. These were things she could only say to a friend. "My life as I knew it is over. There won't be another moment of peace or quiet."

"Oh, stop being silly. This is what we fought for. What needed to happen." Alycia put an arm across her shoulders and turned to the celebrating crowd. "Let's hear it for the new Mayor of Emond's Field, Anna al'Tolan!"

The crowd cheered. The brothers from Deven Ride, the sisters from Taren Ferry, the older men at their tables, the younger girls on the dance floor, her friends, her supporters. Her cousin Franca came to the door of the women's room, clapping, Katerin al'Seen, Corin Ayellin and others behind her as they'd been behind Anna. Jaen Toren had been smoking with some Coplins and Congars, but they emerged from their cloud now. Local girl Nancy al'Donel almost dropped her tray, while Naeve al'Pret from Deven Ride added a little cheer of her own, blushing pink at doing so. They'd both come for archery lessons and stayed to work at The Archers, though sometimes Anna wondered at herself for keeping them on. They were her people, though. They all were, now.

"I couldn't have done it without you all," she said in a gruff shout. "Save the cheers for yourselves." They cheered even louder at that.

"Two out of three," Alycia said, her lips near Anna's ear. It was accidental, she knew. And she didn't like to think of herself as one of her pining admirers. But. The temptations of the fairer sex had proven stronger than Anna anticipated when she'd first decided to experiment. "Faile can't ignore us now."

"She can. More importantly, Perrin won't." He might resent her for how things had turned out, though. Alsbet Luhhan had been their choice. They had no faith left in Marin, who had been one of those who jumped back and forth when under *ta'veren* influence or not. Alsbet was practically Perrin's aunt, what with all the time he'd spent with her and her blacksmith husband, back when he was apprenticed to him. An insult to her wouldn't sit well with him.

She wasn't sure how any of this sat with Emi either. Perrin was her only remaining family and she loved him dearly. She hadn't joined the cheers.

"She'll be fine," Sara said, touching her butt again. "I'll talk to her. Just don't forget about us." Her eyes flicked to Alycia for a moment, and she added a hasty, "Now that you're famous."

Anna snorted loudly. Famous. She remembered thinking Baerlon a grand city. Calling her famous was even less true.

"You've done well, Anna. Now go show the Lady Faile that us Thereners don't give up our freedoms so easily," Franca said.

"Best not make a fool of yourself now, girl. Everyone's watching," old Cenn had to add.

There was that, too. She'd fought for the responsibility, and now she had to shoulder it.

"What will you do if the Aes Sedai come back?" Alycia asked in a lower voice. Her sister Aysha had been one of the girls Maigan took with her when she'd left. One of about two dozen, all of them young. Little more than children. Anna suspected she'd only stopped at that because escorting so many to Tar Valon alone was a prospect to give even an Aes Sedai pause.

"When they come back," she said grimly. When they came back they might well empty the Theren of daughters. Maigan's ageless face had revealed nothing of her thoughts, but Anna had travelled with Aes Sedai and Accepted before. She knew how unlikely it was to find so many potential channelers in one place. She had no answer for Alycia, unfortunately. How could she possibly stop it? They were Aes Sedai. "Let's focus on stopping Faile before we go taking on the White Tower. She'll be hard enough."

The front door opened wide. It had to, for the new arrival was in no state to be slipping through narrow gaps. At five months pregnant, Loise al'Vere's belly was sticking out further than her breasts now. She looked uncertain of her welcome, so Anna marched over to greet her.

"It's good to see you, Loise. Your mother is well I hope?"

Her eyes found the smoothly fitted floorboards. "She's ... quiet."

"It's a lot to take in."

She glanced up again. "For you as well."

Anna nodded vigorously. "For sure. Leaves me thinking about the future. And wondering why I got myself into this mess."

Loise sighed quietly. "Believe me, I can understand that."

So could she. The four al'Vere sisters had faced a lot of judgement lately. Unwed and pregnant. The Women's Circle had made its opinion on *that* situation very plain. And very public. Loise was a tough girl but daily digs from your neighbours could wear anyone down. There had been times Anna had been glad she lived out in the Westwood when she was younger. At least she didn't have to face condemnation for using her father's second name or dressing like a boy *all* the time, only when they visited town. It was all very unfair. It was also probably the only reason there had been an election at all. Loise was a smart girl. She had to know that. Things had been tense at the Winespring Inn all summer. It was part of why Anna visited it so much less these days.

She set her jaw. "I should go and visit your mother."

Loise shook her head. "Not right now. You'd be welcome later, of course. You always have been. She actually sent me to speak to you. I'm to congratulate you on your election, and tell you there are no hard feelings on her part."

"That's a relief. I never wanted any trouble between us. I thought she was a great Mayor. It's just that there are problems facing us that I don't think anyone was dealing with the right way."

Loise crossed her arms, rubbing them against the cold. "For what's it's worth, I think you'll be a great Mayor, too." A rare smile peeked out. "Maybe not as great as my mother, but you're not as bad as most."

Anna grinned. She took Loise by the sleeve and tugged her in. "Why are we standing in the wind? Come have a drink. Are you allowed to drink? Whatever. Tea still counts as a drink."

She came far enough to let the door close, but not much more. "Drinking with the enemy would be scandalous enough, even if she wasn't a waddling scandal like me."

"You're not the enemy and you're not a scandal," Anna muttered, but not everyone in the bar shared her view. Loise was getting those bloody looks again. Once Anna would have been quick with a curt word for the lookers. Not now. That was one of the problems with elections. You needed to appeal to everyone. That was one of the problems with winning an election. Now she had to be everyone's friend instead of just her friends'.

"I should go."

"No," Anna said firmly. "You're like an ambassador or something. We can talk in private." She waved one of her serving girls over. Pretty little Naeve got all flustered again, this time over Loise's belly and the way it tented her dress. "Bring a pot of tea, two cups and a plate of cakes up to my room," she told her.

Naeve dipped a little curtsy, one stolen from the girls Faile had been training to work in her mansion. "Right away, Mistress al'Tolan." She hustled off to get the tea. She was a good girl, really. And a far better shot than Anna had expected; at least when her hands weren't shaking.

For all her reluctance, Loise followed Anna up the wooden stairs readily enough. The al'Vere family had rooms at the back of their inn, where it was quieter, but over here Anna had taken the room just above her front door instead. It gave her a good view of the bridge and the Green. She would rather be informed than comfortable. There wasn't much in the way of luxury inside, just a bed that was too big for her, a low table between two nicely cushioned armchairs with tall backs. A plain wardrobe and drawers to store things. The floor was carpeted in white but the wooden walls were bare save for Anna and her deceased father's bows, resting atop hooks in line with each other above her headboard.

Loise waited for her leave to enter, and then went to the window to stare out pensively while they waited for Naeve. "So much has changed," she mused.

Anna followed her gaze to the distant wall. Emond's Field had never had a wall before. This one was pretty small in comparison to those she'd seen around Fal Dara or the great cities she'd visited. It was stone, and would have watchtowers and battlements when it was finished. A defensive wall around Emond's Field, so they would be better prepared when the next attack came. That was how they spoke of it. Not if. When.

"It has," she agreed quietly. "And more will. For good or ill." Rand would cause most of it, she expected. Whether he meant to or not.

"The Breaking of the World, come again," Loise said. She was watching Anna, her expression hard to read.

Naeve came clattering down the hall at just that moment. A sharp look from Anna made her cheeks flare yet again, but that could mean anything with her. "Thank you, Naeve. Set the tray on the

table please, and then go see to the customers,” she said. If she’d heard, she’d heard. No sense asking about it.

“Have a seat, please,” Anna said, once Naeve was gone. She took one of the chairs and poured for them both.

Loise did waddle a little bit, it had to be admitted. She awkwardly manoeuvred herself into place, sighed gladly, and accepted the cup Anna offered. “How bad do you think it will be? I mean, you didn’t go to all this trouble over Faile alone, did you?”

Anna cleared her throat. “Actually, I kind of did.” She laughed at the look on Loise’s face. “At least at first. I’m not having the Theren ruled by that bloody lady, even if she does have Perrin helping her. Or having her children rule ours after she’s gone. Bloody load of nonsense, that.” Loise rubbed at her belly, and nodded readily enough. They’d been friends before this all kicked off. She hoped they could be again. “But that doesn’t mean that other problems haven’t worked their way into my thoughts in the time since.”

“Rand,” Loise whispered. She didn’t stop rubbing her belly.

“I meant what I said back then. He’s not a false Dragon. These really are—” Blood and ashes, she hadn’t expected her voice to fail her. She’d been to war with the Shadow and their monsters, had looked right at the Forsaken themselves with her own two eyes. Why was she suddenly so nervous? She steadied her voice. “It’s really coming. The end times. Unless we stop it.”

“*Can* we stop it?” Loise asked.

“Yes,” Anna said at once. She had no idea how they would, but she said it anyway.

Loise leaned back in her chair, a wry smile on her face. “I believe you. About him, too.”

Now they were venturing into dangerous territory. Anna hadn’t been one of those who pestered Loise over who the father was. It was none of her business. But these questions, that little pat of the belly, his inclinations? She suspected she knew. Such a mess. What would he do if he ever found out? So many ways the mess could get worse.

“Berowyn told me what you said. About the man who killed our sister. The ...” Loise gulped, and went on in a whisper. “The Forsaken.”

That had been a hard talk. “A man who could channel” was all Rand had told them about the killer. Berowyn had feared it was himself he spoke of, him being the only man who could channel she knew of. She’d been nearly as nervous as Naeve when she brought it up with Anna. She’d actually wept with relief when she reassured her that it had been Aginor. Anna wasn’t really one for hugs, or for comforting crying women, but she’d done her best.

“Like I said. The end times.”

“And you and Perrin were out there fighting it.”

“What happens here is important, too,” Anna said defensively. What good could she have done if she’d stuck with Rand? One girl with a bow. She hadn’t really done much while travelling with him. Helped as best she could, of course, but her best hadn’t made much of a difference as far as she could tell. She could do more here.

“I wasn’t claiming otherwise,” Loise assured her. “You and Perrin don’t talk about it much.”

She made a quick shrug. “Best I can tell we’ve told folk all the big parts between us. The Horn. Falme. The Seanchan. The rest is just personal stuff.” The sky would turn green before Perrin told them about his talking to wolves. Or Anna told, for that matter.

Loise discovered a fascination with the contents of her teacup. “Personal stuff you’d only share with friends.”

“Don’t be silly, Loise. We’re friends. At least, *I* think we are.”

“I’d like that. They’re hard to find these days,” she sighed. “Rand doesn’t seem to have much trouble finding them, though, despite what he is.”

Wasn’t that the truth? “I don’t think that would be so if he was just another male channeler,” Anna said judiciously. “Moiraine said that *ta’veren* draw who they need to them. And I can see it with him.”

“Who did he draw to him?” Loise was being pretty persistent, but Anna didn’t want to get involved in another of Rand’s messes.

“Oh, you know. He ran into Loial that time, just before we found out we needed an Ogier guide to use the Ways.” He’d fallen into a palace garden and made friends with the beautiful

Daughter-Heir of Andor, too. And inspired the new Queen of Falmerden to come to his rescue. But that was exactly the awkwardness Anna didn't want to discuss.

Loise's wants did not match hers. "What about Min? Or Saeri? Or Merile? How did he draw so many pretty girls to him?"

Burn you, Rand! It should be him having this conversation, not Anna. She was innocent. To be fair, he had been driven out of Emond's Field under a hail of arrows, so not coming back to visit and explain himself was understandable. That didn't make it any less awful.

She sighed deep. "You're as pretty as any of them, Loise. It's not you. It's Rand. He's ... If he was ever going to be the faithful husband type," which was a big if, "it would have been before finding out he was the Dragon Reborn."

Loise flushed. "I ... I never said I ... R-Rand isn't ..."

"That's true. You never said it. Sorry for making a weird assumption," Anna said calmly. "Would you like some more tea?"

"No, thanks," Loise sighed, and sat silent for a moment. "I'd like him to be here so I could slap him. And so I could tell him how much my back hurts. Or that my breasts feel weird now." She gave Anna a pitiful smile, dark eyes sparkling with unshed tears. "It wasn't that weird an assumption."

Anna had never been a hugger but that, too, was something she was getting better at. She set down her cup and got up. Short as she was, it wasn't hard to hug Loise's cheek to her breast. "Don't worry, I won't tell anyone. And I get it. If things were different ..." She wondered if Loise would like to know about the Portal Stones and the worlds they linked to. There was probably one with her and Rand living on a farm together. Anna had certainly seen less likely worlds during that horrific mishap on the way to Falme.

Loise was hugging her back. "Did he draw you to him as well?" she asked.

Blood and ashes. She didn't want to lie. Or answer. But Loise had confessed her secret; did fairness not ask her to do the same? "It's ... confused. I never thought of him like that when we were growing up. But ... things happened, out in the world. I knew what he was like, so I didn't take it seriously. But sometimes the heart betrays the brain, and you find yourself imagining things."

"I get that. I did think of him that way. For years. So when I saw the chance, I seized it. Now look at me. I may never see him again, and if I did he'd probably run away since I look so gross."

"You don't look gross," Anna scoffed.

"Neither do you," Loise said, raising her head and aiming her lips at Anna's. She saw it coming but she let the kiss land.

"What are you doing, Loise?" she whispered, once her lips had paused their exploratory caress.

"I don't know. I'm just so lonely," her friend said with heart-breaking honesty.

Anna kissed her back then. She hadn't really meant to, but burn her, someone had to do it.

Loise, it turned out, was not just lonely. She was also very horny. When she couldn't find a proper angle, she clambered awkwardly from the chair and wrapped her arm around Anna's neck, her mouth hot on hers, tongue questing already. She took Anna's hand and guided it to her bottom, asking for it to be squeezed. It was a bit awkward to do with her bump in the way, but Anna gave her what she wanted.

She took Anna to bed, and Anna let her. How easy that had gotten, since that first time with Emi. Was it weird that Perrin's cousin had replaced Perrin in her bed? Or that the mother of Rand's child was seeking to replace Rand? Clothes were coming off. Loise's hands were shaking. Anna wrestled her thoughts to order, determined not to over think things for once.

Loise's dress had fallen to her elbows, revealing her swollen breasts with their dark nipples, the distended bump of her ripening stomach. Her eyes revealed as well.

Anna didn't need to lie to them. "You look beautiful."

"You don't have to say that."

"I know." She sat beside her. "Are they sensitive? Can I touch them?"

"If you're gentle ..."

She could be gentle, despite the calluses on her hands. There were certainly none on the lips she touched to them. Loise was breathing fast. She was tugging at Anna's clothes as well but she couldn't help but notice that none of her softer parts were being targeted. Loise certainly wasn't rushing to fondle *her* breasts.

Anna dressed like a boy, cut her hair as short as one. Unkind folk had sometimes said she looked like one, too. She hoped Loise wasn't thinking of her as one.

Her breasts were still soft but her bump hard. It was quite fascinating really. Hard to imagine herself in the same state, though she did plan to have children one day. Assuming she could find a man responsible enough to have them with. Her pussy was surprisingly wet, too, when Anna pushed her dress the rest of the way down and rid her of her underwear.

The moan she let out at being touched was loud with relief. Poor girl must have been really feeling it. Anna went to work right away, pushing her back onto the bed, spreading her legs and kissing between them. The sounds she made were gratifying enough that she forgot her annoyance at not being touched in return.

For now, at least. She kept undressing herself as she kissed Loise's slit. She teased out and sucked on that most sensitive spot, too. The hands that clamped to the back of her head then made it impossible to see what she was doing as she took off her shoes.

She climbed onto the bed once she was naked, kissing her way up and over the bump as she went. Loise looked uncertain as she touched Anna's small breasts. She'd obviously never been with another girl before but Anna wasn't judging. It hadn't been that long ago that she was touching Emi just as awkwardly.

Should she take charge? There were some toys in the drawer, items she'd copied from Faile's *Far Dareis Mai* friends. It hadn't been easy finding a woman who knew how to put the leather straps together, or one willing to polish a wooden part to such specific shape. It had been embarrassing enough asking a woman, she certainly wasn't about to ask a man. It wasn't very feminine, either. It being Loise's first time, she decided to leave them there.

"We'll do this your way," Anna whispered. "What do you want?"

What she wanted was to be on top. Loise straddled her and started rolling her hips. There was little save a hard stomach to roll against, though, so Anna urged her to waddle forwards until her sex was above Anna's face. It made for a distinctly different view than those Emi or Sara, skinny things that they were, afforded her the times they'd sat so. She could see nothing save the bump and the hairy pussy beneath. It was the latter she kissed, but the former she stared at as Loise's moans filled the room.

The situation was exciting to her, too. She could feel her own wetness between her thighs as surely as she could feel Loise's trickling down her cheeks. Knowing that it was Rand's baby that the woman sitting on her face was carrying made her feel extra naughty. She licked at her eagerly, enjoying those moans and wanting her to come.

She gasped in surprise when she felt a hand cup her sex and a finger slip inside. "Oh, Anna. That feels so good," Loise said. It wasn't the most skilled of fingerings, but the meaning behind it mattered more.

She found Loise's butt cheeks once more, and kneaded them as she drove the pregnant woman towards her dreamt of climax. It didn't take long. Even if all she could see was the bump, it wasn't hard to notice when she came. The sounds she made and the warm gushing that resulted told the tale plainly enough.

Loise didn't rest her weight on Anna's face as she'd half-feared. She fell to her side instead, flushed and breathing heavily. She stammered an apology when Anna bunched the sheet enough to rub at her face. Anna laughed it off.

"Don't be sorry. I'm not. I enjoyed hearing you do that. A little pussy juice never hurt anyone."

"I wouldn't know."

"Are you going to find out?" Anna asked with a teasing smile.

Loise bit her lip softly. "I wouldn't be as good as you."

"That doesn't matter. It being you is what matters; the rest just comes with experience." She found herself blushing, too. "I've ... I've always liked you, Loise."

She grinned at that. "I've always liked you, too." She moved awkwardly, ever careful of the baby she carried, as she got between Anna's legs. "Twice now. I have a bad habit of wasting opportunities." Soft hands explored Anna's body admiringly, fingers moving between the slight ridges on her stomach. Anna's thick thighs resisted her squeezing in the way that fat would not have. "You're so muscular. I've never seen a girl like you."

"I'm weird, I know."

"You're not weird. You're wonderful," Loise said, the whispered heat of her voice brushing Anna's pussy. Her lips brushed it a moment later, making her sigh in relief.

She relaxed on the bed and let Loise explore her most private places. She hadn't lied to her. Even her least pleasurable touches caused a different kind of pleasure.

"You're so wet. You really want me ..." Loise said. She sounded surprised.

Anna didn't understand that. Every al'Vere girl she'd met was very pretty, and Loise certainly wasn't the exception. "You're a beautiful woman, Loise. Most people in town want you, whether they admit it or not." Her tongue lapped faster against Anna's sex. "Is it Rand? Don't take his behaviour to heart. He wants you, too. I know him. If he was here, he'd be making that sexy bum of yours shake right about now."

She hadn't lied then, either. She could see it, down past the woman lying on her elbows between Anna's legs. She didn't know if it had always been that round, but she had seen him stare often enough to know how he'd react to the sight.

"It's gotten so fat," Loise complained.

"Shake ... like ... like ..." She couldn't think of anything. She'd never been a talker. Now she was Mayor, she'd have to learn to be. "He'd want you as much as I do." Which was a fair bit. "Loise ... If you lick the other part ... just a little ... I might ..."

She understood. And found it fast. Anna sucked in a breath and held Loise's head just as she'd been held earlier. Satisfaction eluded her for a while, but eventually it washed over her and left her trembling on the bed.

Loise sat up between her splayed legs, a smug little grin on her face. "That wasn't so hard."

"Congratulations. You're a natural pussy licker. Don't let it go to your head," Anna said.

The other girl laughed and swatted at her playfully. Anna rarely thought of her younger sister anymore, but she couldn't help but compare them then. Egwene had never responded well to being teased. Loise's pregnant belly rested heavy on Anna's flat one for a moment as she was moving to lie at her side. She didn't embrace her. She kept her hands above and below her bump instead. Anna dared to touch it, too.

I just fucked your mom, kid. Hope you don't mind.

"What now?" Loise asked.

"You're welcome to spend the night."

She shook her head at once. "I wouldn't mind, but my mother might. I don't want her to think I'm betraying her by staying with her replacement."

Anna understood. And approved. "You're good people, Loise."

"So are you," Loise said, and kissed her on the cheek. She hesitated, her face so close.

Anna did it herself. When their lips parted, they both smiled. "You can come back and visit me anytime," she said.

"I think I'd like that."

She stayed on the bed and watched as Loise dressed. The pregnant female body was fascinating to watch. She wondered if this was how men felt on seeing a naked girl. Being a girl herself, Anna didn't really share the fascination, for all that she'd come to enjoy female company. Soon enough Loise was pulling her stumpy braid out of the way to do up the last ties on her dress. No one who hadn't been in the room could have told that anything had changed, but Anna felt that it had.

"I take it you're not coming down with me," Loise said, indicating Anna's continued nudity.

She smiled wryly. "I don't think you realise how much time has passed."

"Really? I should get back."

Anna nodded. "Be sure to tell your mother I look forward to having a friendly chat with her. I miss the taste of her cooking, and could use all the advice she's willing to give me."

Loise smiled. "I'll tell her." She paused at the door. "Thanks for this."

"It was my pleasure," Anna said with a grin.

Alone in her room, she rested her hands behind her head and sighed deeply. Tomorrow she would need to meet with those who'd been against her. Marin's remaining supporters, and the bigger crowd that had been for Alsбет. Kicking Faile out altogether wouldn't have been an option even if she hadn't married Perrin. She could have a family on Theren land, so long as she paid for it. Plenty of families had been wiped out by the Trollocs, or just died out in the generations before. There was

space. Rule them, though? Not with Emond's Field and Deven Ride against her. Not even with the Heart Guard being as devoted as they were.

After a while, Anna got up and opened her drawers. Pulling on a bathrobe and hiding the other underneath, she left her room and padded down the hall. It sounded quiet downstairs, and mostly quiet upstairs. Until she reached the door to Emi's room. Soft sounds issued from within. Anna was still reluctant to open that door—or any door!—without knocking, but she did it anyway.

Emi and Sara were on the bed, kissing and fondling each other, as expected. She closed the door behind her and dropped the robe. Sara smiled a greeting, but Emi gasped dramatically.

“Oh no. The big, bad Mayor's come to put us naughty girls in our place,” she giggled. She wiggled her pretty little butt in Anna's direction, as unashamed of her sexuality as she was of the stumps of her severed legs.

Saying nothing, Anna stepped into and fastened the leather straps. Then she strode to the bed and set about doing just that. As she mounted Emi, a small, unworthy part of her imagined it was Faile she was taking, and her hand tightened in the girl's hair.

CHAPTER 18: *The Falcon's Talons*



The plates in the cupboard he was pressing her against shook against each other loudly. They might have been on the verge of breaking, and ordinarily Perrin would have pulled himself away from that, but he couldn't imagine pulling away from her. Not even if she'd let him. Faile's nails dug into the meaty flesh of his straining buttocks, urging him to fuck her even harder.

He did, pounding his wife's delicious tightness for what had to be the hundredth time. She looked so beautiful with her high-boned cheeks flushed with passion, her dark and slightly slanted eyes dancing with joy at their joining. She rested in his arms, trusting him to hold her aloft as she ground against him, pleasuring him with her sex, demanding his seed.

Perrin kissed her hard. She welcomed his bearded face to hers, and sought out his tongue so she could greet it as well. She was such a delight. So aggressive, so passionate. Everything he did not dare to be. And all his.

She'd been a virgin on their wedding night. He alone had tasted her, and watched her grow into the woman she was now, delighting in every testing touch and mounting hunger.

Her soft young breasts were pressing against his hard and hairy chest now. They were naked and in their house. A perfectly natural place for a young married couple to be. A perfectly natural thing for them to be doing. Yet Perrin's heart pounded with excitement just to be with her once more.

"I love you," he told her.

"I love you, too," she said. Then she bit his lip. "Now fuck me harder."

Perrin pulled out, set her down and spun her around. He could only spare a moment to enjoy the sight of her pretty little bottom, however. His cock was crying out to return to her heat. Taking her by the hair, he gave them both what they wanted. Faile leant against the cupboard, breasts bouncing as Perrin's hips slapped against hers hard and fast.

Part of him still hated to be rough with her, but she'd told him often enough how much she enjoyed it. And another part of him, a part he usually kept held down, hungered to be as wild as she was. She had teased it out of him earlier that evening while they were waiting for the results, and now they both bore and revelled in the price.

By the time he came in his wife's womb, her buttocks were red and she wore a sheen of sweat. She leaned against the cupboard and let him fill her, as rung out as a squeezed sponge.

Faile groaned lightly as she eased him out of her abused sex, and turned to wrap her arms around him. Her kiss was tender now, her anger banked. "My husband. My wolf king," she breathed.

Perrin would have dressed, but Faile just went and took a seat at the kitchen table. The helpers she'd hired—he refused to call them servants—had all gone home for the night. She claimed that it would be more proper for them to sleep in little cubicles here at the mansion, to be on hand when they called, but Perrin wasn't having them living in his house where he might trip over them at any time, or have to wonder if they were listening whenever he and Faile wanted to be intimate. He'd gotten his way in that, simply by being honest. He'd gotten a lot more, after that particular argument, in fact.

At other times he had been less fortunate. Faile claimed to like it when he stood up to her, but she sure didn't make it easy for him to do so. And she most definitely did not like it when other people stood up to her.

"I would like to know how close it was," she said as she poured herself a drink. "Daisy was part of the counting, and I had not thought to doubt her loyalty but I am an outsider here, as your charming little friend is so fond of pointing out. Are the Congars truly as treacherous as reputed?"

He sighed, left his clothes where they lay, and padded across the cold tiles to get an apple from the basket by the window. Candles were still burning out in Emond's Field. He wondered what they were doing at the Winespring Inn tonight, or over in Anna's new place. Mayor Anna's. Who would have thought it?

"Give over, Faile. The Women's Circle were all part of it. Even if any of them were inclined to cheat, the others wouldn't stand for it."

“More might have stood for *us* if you had spoken up more,” she said sharply. “Part of it indeed. I’ll wager Anna had the whole Women’s Circle after their husbands for her, while we trusted to gratitude.” Faile shook her head. “Silly men don’t talk about whose name they’re putting in the box beforehand; I suppose every man who voted for Anna thought he was the only one whose wife had badgered him into it. Thought one vote would make no difference. Well, they learned better. We all did.”

It made him uncomfortable. He had never wanted to be involved in anything like this. He was a blacksmith, nothing more. “Alsbet, Anna, Marin ... they would all have been good at the job. What difference does it make?”

“What indeed?” Faile snapped. Then she sighed. The sighing hurt more. “Perrin, my Perrin. You are too humble for your own good. I had not thought this to be part of a wife’s duties ...”

He wasn’t as clueless about the situation as he pretended to be. It was just that he agreed with Anna more than he could ever bring himself to tell his wife. He hated the way his old friends and neighbours tugged their forelocks and called him “Lord Perrin” these days. If she wanted to put a stop to that sort of nonsense, then he certainly wasn’t going to fight against her. He hoped she was more successful at it than he was! How many times had he yelled at folk not to call him Lord Perrin, only for them to laugh and say, “As you say, Lord Perrin?”

Telling Faile that would have thrown an icy bucket’s worth of water over their wedded bliss, however. She knew he and Anna had stepped out in the past. He remembered how she’d reacted to finding out that he’d kissed Cilia Cole back when they were little. Just one kiss, and a long time ago, but Faile’s jealousy had been such that he doubted the Coles had voted for Alsbet.

The less said about her response to Gaul’s suggestion that they solve the problem the same way he’d solved things between him, Chiad and Bain the better.

He didn’t understand why Gaul was still here. He’d freed the Aielman from a cage once, but whatever debt that incurred had long since been repaid. Perrin had told him as much, citing the closing of the Waygate back during the war here. Still Gaul lingered, the lone Aiel tent on the village Green having become a familiar sight. Aram’s loyalty was even harder to understand. He slept at the Winespring Inn but made his way here as soon as the sun rose, acting like Perrin and Faile’s self-appointed bodyguard. Perrin sometimes wondered if he fancied one or both of them, but that explanation didn’t sit well. He and Aram had met long before he took up the sword, and had not gotten along at all. At least Dannil and the rest of the lads’ loyalties made sense.

With his apple finished, he went over and carefully dropped the core into the slop bucket.

“She will make things more difficult for us. And for herself, the fool,” Faile abruptly said. “An army cannot function with two generals.”

“We aren’t an army, Faile. And we aren’t at war.”

She shook her head at him. “All nations are armies. And the war never ends. Blasted southlanders.” Her voice became a mutter at the end, and stayed so as she went on. “I’m tempted to borrow Bain’s toy.”

Standing behind her chair, he set his hands to her shoulders. “Haven’t you enjoyed this peace?”

“More than you can know,” Faile said. She leant back against him and closed her eyes. “I know it’s just a dream, but it’s ... a dream.”

Perrin chuckled. He refused to think of Rand and the dreams that he’d been avoiding so hard, and definitely not of the surety that this must end eventually. Instead, he tucked his arms under his wife’s legs and picked her up. She was so light he barely even felt the strain.

“Hmm ... haven’t you gotten enough yet?” she teased. Her long fingers played with the hair on his chest.

“I could never get enough of you,” he said as he left the kitchen and headed for the stairs. It was the plain truth. And why he didn’t get to sleep until well after Midnight.

CHAPTER 19: *New Moon*



The central room of Rand's quarters in the Sun Palace had a raised dais at one end with a single chair, and two lines of chairs proceeding down either side. Rand did not like it, for it felt a cold and arrogant way to speak to people you'd invited for a private talk. The marble floor was mostly hidden by a red and gold carpet, the furnishings were predictably rich, and the moonless sky beyond the tall windows reminded him that he should have been in bed a long time ago.

There was too much work to do, however. He'd drafted the orders for Tear, along with the proclamation he wanted the High Nobles to read out. Should he go there in person, to make sure they read it and acted on it? He could not afford to. Burn him, he could not be everywhere at once. If they defied him, he'd hear about it eventually. And then he'd do what he must.

"You and Inukai will be in charge of the camp here in Cairhien," he told Geko. The five Shienaran armsmen still with him sat in the chairs nearest to his raised one, clad in white surcoats with his sigil embroidered across the chest. "I don't expect there to be as many Cairhienin recruits, so one camp should suffice. We'll split the work in Tear, one camp east of the Arindrelle, one west."

Geko nodded silently. The one-armed man had been one of those who helped Rand plan out how to fund and organise this venture. He already knew all of what was to be said, and what was in the sealed letters sitting now on the dais near Rand's feet. Veterans to be drafted to assist with training and discipline; drafted by the Shienarans and placed under their commands. Money orders in Rand's name. Authorisation to seize certain lands and properties for military use. All of it naming each of these men as a captain in his army.

The promotions didn't seem to interest any of them much. From grizzled Uno with his scowl, to smooth young Izana, who looked so miserable, they were all more interested in the job than the glory. Rand wished he had a hundred more like them. He was sad to have to part from them.

"Three of us. But two camps," Ayame pointed out.

"I'll be sending Rikimaru to join you in the west as soon as he gets back," Rand said.

The slender man smiled a rare smile. "Thank you, my Lord Dragon." He looked to Izana for some reason, who echoed his smile, albeit wanly.

"Me and the kid, then, I take it?" said Uno. "Bur—Ah! I'll whip them into shape, and then he can sing them to flame—Peace!—to sleep after. My Lord Dragon." Uno mopped at his brow with the back of his hand after that valiant effort at not cursing.

Rand shook his head to himself, grinning. It would probably be good for him to be away from Rand for a while, if only so he could speak freely without nearly having a heart attack.

"Rand. M-my Lord Dragon. Are you sure ... Don't you think you should k-keep some of us close to you?" Izana asked nervously.

"I should do lots of things," Rand said, frowning at nothing. "Some of those things I can do. Some get in the way of other things. Having men I trust around me is good. Having men I trust to run these camps is good as well, however, and the last one is more important to the war effort."

"But Rand! Is that even true? What if, if you are h-hurt? If it was something I could have stopped if I hadn't been too far away, I don't think I could forgive myself." His dark eyes, so big for a boy's, were filled with earnest resolve. "And the war would be lost without you."

The frowns of the older three didn't faze him, but whatever it was that Ayame whispered when he leaned over from his chair made Izana's cheeks redden.

"Wh—W-w-what're you saying ...? Y-y-you sure do think some weird—things ..."

Whatever the point was, Ayame didn't argue it. He just shook his head over Izana's behaviour.

"Force multiplication, Izana," Geko said. "As much as we all want to protect the Lord Dragon so he can defeat the Shadow, we can do more for him by training southlanders to want and be able to do the same."

Rand nodded. "This is important work. It's how they do things in Mayene, and it works for them. If I have my way, all the nations will be doing it soon." Every man obliged by law to learn how to fight the Shadow, and stand ready to do so when needed. It made perfect bloody sense to him.

Before more could be said, the doors opened and a pair of Aiel stepped in. Not just a Maiden tonight. The men who'd helped escort Rand earlier had refused to return to the tents without an order, and Rand hadn't been inclined to give one. *Far Dareis Mai* feathers were ruffled, even those of the normally ice-cold Tenelca. Mangin looked pleased, though, as he announced the arrival of Moiraine Sedai.

The interruption annoyed Izana, who looked miserably between Rand and the Aielman, but there was nothing more to be said about the matter, so far as Rand could see. It was not as if he was sending them away because he didn't like them. He liked and trusted all of them. Izana in particular was about as close to a friend as he'd made since leaving the Theren. As close to a male friend, at least.

He had other problems to deal with, however. "What brings you here, Moiraine?"

"Business," she said coolly. *Pity*. "A message just arrived from Lady Ailil Riatin." Said message was held in her hand. He didn't bother asking how it had come to be there.

He didn't get up from his chair either. She had taught him not to, after all. She could hardly complain, and did not. No smile marred her ageless visage as she handed the letter to the girl who sulked at her back. Moiraine's whisper made Jubes hunch her shoulders.

"That's crazy. Why should I stick my neck out?" she said angrily. "I don't even know him."

It was a surprise that the girl would have the nerve to speak so to an Aes Sedai. Less of a surprise that said Aes Sedai's quiet rebuke would send her scampering across the marble to deliver the letter to Rand's hand.

Moiraine watched him open the letter and read. She did not ask after the contents, but he told her anyway. "Ailil is happy to accept my invitation to the City and my promise of safety, and has told her friends as much." He hadn't promised safety but her threat to dishonour him was unneeded. There had never been a moment in which he'd considered hurting her.

"Swift progress, made with reliable assistants," Moiraine said. "Speaking of which, young Jubes has proven herself useful and is at a loss for what to do with herself. The staff you employed are still in Tear, so I thought it best she fill in for them until their return."

"You have no more use for a maid?" he asked.

Moiraine raised a thin brow. "When have I ever? Did you think I was interviewing her for myself? You still have much to learn."

He might at that. But not so much that he thought Moiraine was particularly concerned over who refreshed his washbowl. Why did she still see the need for a spy, after all they'd done together? Once, not too long ago, he would have refused immediately. Now? Now he found himself trusting her enough that he was willing to allow her spy to spy as she pleased. Light. Had he lost his mind? Maybe he should have turned her down when she first propositioned him. She had robbed him of his wits along with his heart.

"What does Jubes have to say about that?" he said. He hadn't really paid that much attention to her before. She was pretty enough that he normally would have, with her expressive eyes, golden skin and slim vigour, but he thought she probably blamed him for the destruction of her hometown. The Aiel who'd done it were his enemies so it hadn't been his responsibility, but that was a rationality that was easy to say and harder to believe. Aiel were Aiel, and Rand was the Aiel leader. That was what he'd suspected, anyway. But Moiraine wouldn't put her near him if that was the case.

Jubes shrugged sulkily under his scrutiny. "What the heck. I've nothing else to do."

"I guess Saeri will be happy of the help," he said. There was a letter for her in the pile at his feet, too. And others for Avaleen and Thom. That last, to be delivered by way of Imoen, had been the hardest for Rand to write.

"Quite. But the hour grows late. She can start tomorrow. Come along, girl," Moiraine said. She left without waiting to see if Jubes would. The girl did follow in the end, but she went while kicking at her yellow skirts and muttering depredations.

"Lord Agelmar would never have stood for that behaviour from his servants," Izana said after Mangin had pulled the door shut again. "You deserve bet ..." He trailed off.

"I'm sure Moiraine Sedai knows what she's doing," greying Inukai said, though even that hard-bitten scout looked a bit dubious.

Rand shrugged, got up and lifted his letters. "I've never been one for formality," he said as he sorted. It was true. The girl's irreverence didn't bother him in the slightest. He'd actually have preferred more of that to the way all five of them got to their feet as soon as he had.

He sorted the pile for Geko first, the smallest, since he would be closest to hand. Ayame and Uno needed more, as well as instructions on who to speak to on their arrival in Tear. The biggest pile, the one with his personal missives, he gave into Uno's stout care. Unasked for vows of safe deliverance were made. He told them he'd visit to check on their progress, but wasn't sure if he really would. There was so much to do. He'd try, though, that much he knew.

Rand walked them to the door. Another thing a proper lord shouldn't do. Being a proper lord didn't seem very, well, proper, to him.

Izana had dragged his feet all the way across the room, and was the last to leave. He was plainly no more happy with the situation than Rand was, but duty made its demands of them both.

"I'll miss you," Rand told him with a sad smile.

His chin shook. "Y-you ..." Rather than continue, Izana shut the door and leaned against it as if trying to hold back the world, or the Wheel. "Rand. My, m-my lo ..."

"What's wrong?" he asked, and was shocked to see tears in the Shienaran's eyes.

"I need to ask you something! Do you ... did you ... could you e-ever ... would you ki—" he put a hand to his throat, as if to strangle his own words.

Rand was at a loss. He essayed a small smile. "That was a lot of questions. Calm down, Izana. What is it you want to say?"

It didn't work at all the way he'd hoped. Rather than laughing it off, Izana flinched as if struck. "Rand, you don't really care about me, do you?" he said, as angry and upset as Rand had ever seen him.

"Of course I care!" Rand said.

"But ...! But not the way I—" Words failing again, Izana abruptly stepped forward, went up on tiptoe and pressed his mouth to Rand's.

He was too shocked to respond. Izana's lips were passionate on his. It was no mere peck; he meant it. His eyes were closed. He was prettier than most men, his round face looking almost girlish at times. And he was as good a friend as could be asked for. Rand already loved him, for all intents and purposes, but he had never imagined that Izana thought of him in that way.

Izana pulled away again and opened his eyes, to show Rand the heartbreak there. "S-sorry! Sorry! Rand, don't, don't be mad! I'm really sorry! I meant no offense!"

Blood and ashes! I'm ruining it. Shaking his thoughts into order, he caught Izana by the arm before he could turn away. "I'm not offended," he murmured as he leant down. He didn't need the arm behind his neck to capture Izana's lips. He melted into his embrace the instant they touched, relief shuddering from his chest.

The topknot and partially shaven head were still strange to the sight, and to the touch, but he thought nothing strange about caressing the other boy's face, brushing their lips together, or asking his tongue to dance.

"You don't mind ..." Izana whispered in wonder.

Rand stopped to look at him apologetically. "It never occurred to me you might be interested in other boys. Or that you might like me."

"I don't," Izana said, leaving Rand to straighten up with a blush and rub awkwardly at the back of his own head. Dark eyes blinked rapidly. "I-I mean, I d-don't because ... I love you."

He found himself smiling like a loon. Ambushed by a confession from nowhere, and not at all hurt. Quite the opposite.

When he reached for Izana again, however, he squirmed away, casting wary looks at the door. "But it's kind of gross to be in public ... What if people come in ...?"

Rand seized him by the hand. "Come with me." That hand closed around his and followed where he led, but trembled when they reached the door to Rand's bedroom, which was already lit by the low lamps that burned each night to ward off Fades. When he pulled him inside and closed the door against intruders, Izana leaned back against it, too. He was so cute. Rand leaned close and looked him in the eye. The sound the latch made when he closed it was very loud.

"Y-you're really ... really interested in me?" he asked, wide-eyed. "Someone as awesome as you? This isn't pity is it?"

"I should be asking that of you," he said. Izana started chewing on his lips, so Rand leaned even closer and took care of that problem for him. Alone in Rand's room, Izana's tongue caressed his while his hands tugged at his clothes. He was shaking so hard that he struggled to undo the buttons on his red coat, so Rand took care of that, too.

Izana matched Rand's actions, removing his coat as well, though he went and hung his over the arm of the sofa rather than drop it on the floor like Rand did. He took off his shirt when Rand did, too, revealing paler skin than that still tanned from the Aiel Waste, and a torso more lean than muscular. He had an easier time taking off his boots than Rand did, and was undoing his topknot when Rand unbuckled his belt and pushed his breeches down.

Silky dark hair fell to frame Izana's face. His eyes fell, too, to stare open-mouthed at Rand's lower half. He still stood frozen, one hand touching his hair, when Rand had stripped completely.

Only when Rand stepped closer did he gulp and raise his eyes. "All that ... for me?"

Was he surprised by the erection that bobbed before him? "I told you I want you," he said, and found he had to swallow as well over how true it was.

Izana blushed. "I am yours. All of me." He undid his belt and revealed that all. He was trembling all over, even the thin cock that popped up as he undid his breechclout. It wasn't very big but that didn't matter. It was part of Izana.

Rand smiled reassuringly and stepped close to take him by the arms and kiss his lips. He felt their swords cross, sensitive stiffness powered by their racing hearts. He moved his hips, seeking more of that touch, but they swayed against each other too much. So he gathered them together with his hand, holding their cocks side by side as he slowly rocked his hips.

Gasping, Izana removed his tongue from Rand's mouth and looked down at the two of them. "It feels so good when you touch me," he said.

"I'm glad," Rand said, and gently pushed him back towards the bed. Izana didn't want to take his eyes off him, nor did Rand wish to lose the sight of his almost hairless body. Small steps took them to the foot of the bed, where Izana tumbled to the silk sheets. He lay there with his hands raised in surrender and his cock jutting up, waiting for whatever Rand wanted.

What he wanted was to close his hand around that cock, rub it gently, and then touch his thumb to the sensitive tip ever so carefully. Sticky fluid was already leaking out. Izana gasped again, and not in discomfort.

Up and down his hand went, slowly at first, applying a little pressure to the underside of the tip whenever he passed, lightly brushing the top each time he reached it. Izana wasn't gasping any more, he was moaning, and those moans got louder as Rand increased the pace.

He rested his left hand on his thigh, to hold him in place as he masturbated him. Not that escape seemed to be anywhere in Izana's thoughts just then.

"You ... You're so good ..." he said between sharply sucked in breaths.

The praise spurred him on, just as the sight of his friend in the throes of pleasure did. Under assault by Rand's quick wrists, and already over-excited, it didn't take long for Izana to come. When he did, it was in relative silence. He sucked in a deep breath and clamped his mouth shut as though about to dive into deep water. His face told the tale that his voice would not as white liquid spurted from his cock, the first jet landing on his upper chest, the next on his nipples, then his ribs, his belly, the little dark hairs and the hand that still stroked him. Rand teased out the last drops, and enjoyed the satisfied way that held breath sighed out of him.

"F-finally ..."

Releasing him, Rand got on the bed. He felt like a bit of a heel. How long had Izana been at his side now? How long had he been harbouring such intense feelings, while Rand wandered blithely on, oblivious? He was a poor friend.

Izana was a great friend, though. While still catching his breath, he rolled onto his belly and brought his face close to Rand's member. He took it in hand, marvelling at its length for a moment, before taking it in mouth as well.

Rand moaned wordlessly. Izana didn't even try to take it all the way in, but his wet tongue went to work at once, licking him intently while he suckled. Around and around that tongue went, sending shivers down Rand's cock and up his spine. Izana's eyes were closed. He didn't seem to mind the taste at all. In fact, from the way he was stroking Rand's shaft, it might have been thought he wanted to taste a lot more.

But it was something else Izana hungered for. His little pink tongue traced its way down the side of Rand's cock, all the way to his balls, heavy with desire. He kissed one, and opened his eyes. "I want you in me." As he spoke, down past cock and adoring face, Rand could see the pale bottom that he swayed from side to side.

"That makes two of us," Rand growled, sitting up.

Izana hopped to his knees at once, but then looked at a loss as to what to do next. Rand took him by the hand and pulled him further up the bed, where he snatched up pillows and arranged them. Panting understanding, Izana rested his hips atop one and spread his legs. While he was fixing another under his head, Rand fed his desire, affection and nervous excitement into the flame and allowed the unwelcome void to calm all. *Saidin* filled him with its tainted heat, but he held it only long enough to slicken his manhood before tossing it aside and welcoming back the flood of emotions he had pushed aside. It had all happened so fast that Izana didn't even notice.

He certainly noticed when the head of Rand's cock poked against his little hole, however.

"Relax. You can do it," he whispered to himself.

"Are you okay?" Rand asked. "We can stop if you want."

"No! Please don't. I am not worthy, but I've dreamt of this so long ..." he beseeched.

Rand took him by the legs and pulled him into his lap, pressing forwards. "You're very worthy," he breathed.

Fine sentiments, but Izana proved extremely tight. So much so that Rand suspected it might be his first time. He went slowly, rolling his hips in a circle, prodding only lightly, but still didn't make much headway. Stamping down his lust-fuelled impatience, he kept at it, teasing the sensitive ring and making Izana whimper cutely.

It took a while, but eventually he relaxed enough that one of those prods made his ass spread around the head of Rand's cock, and another made it slip past his defensive ring.

Izana bit his lip hard. "Ouch!? It hurts! It hurts!"

Rand stopped at once. "We can do other things if you prefer," he offered.

But Izana shook his head stubbornly. "Hold on ... Don't say stuff like that, Rand. We'll never know unless we try ..." Clenching his jaw, he put his feet behind Rand's hips and started pushing himself along Rand's intruding cock. His grip was almost painfully tight for Rand, and would have been even worse for him, but he was not to be stopped. He got a good two thirds of it in before collapsing on the bed with a dazed look in his eyes. "Are you alright, now?"

"It should be me asking you that," Rand said. He set his hand to and lightly stroked the smooth chest his sheets had cleaned, marvelling at the heart that beat underneath.

"You can fuck me ... i-if you w-want. Just ... p-please go slow."

He couldn't refuse that offer. Or that request. As tight as Izana was, each slow back and forth was an adventure of its own, the hard grip making thrilling demands of his sensitive member. His back passage was just as sensitive, and Rand saw and heard the pain and pleasure that mingled in his mount. They held each other's thighs, and Rand was ready for Izana to push him away, but he never did. As the slow stroking continued, he saw the pain begin to lessen in Izana and the pleasure grow in its absence. The sounds and sights were welcome to him.

Not least of which the sight of Izana's cock starting to fill up again. He lay there, eyes closed and blushing as he offered himself as a vessel for Rand's pleasure, enduring obvious discomfort on his behalf, and the longer it went on the more his balls tightened and the evidence of his arousal stretched towards his belly button.

Seeing that, he couldn't help but speed up. Far from complaining, Izana started moving his hips in time with Rand's. Soon enough his hard cock was slapping against his own belly, rising and falling each time Rand moved in and out of him.

Sweeter still was the way to reached up, wordlessly seeking Rand's embrace. He was eager to grant it, pulling Izana up to sit in his lap. They wrapped their arms around each other, hips still moving, and moaned their mutual pleasure in each other's ears as their shared heat seared.

Izana's cock was trapped between them and rubbed by their bellies as they moved. He whimpered Rand's name in his ear. His back and bottom were smooth under Rand's hands. The pulse in his neck raced under his lips.

"It's everything I dreamed," he said.

And Rand came explosively inside him. "Izana," he groaned in that first spurting. His hips stopped but his arms tightened around the other boy's back as pleasure and relief flooded him.

Izana's hips didn't stop when he felt that pleasure flooding his bottom. He craned his head back only enough to see Rand's face while grinding on, milking Rand's cock with his hole. "Yes, Rand. Come in me. I want to make you feel good."

He certainly did that. When he was at last spent, Rand's weary head came to rest on Izana's shoulder. "You're so sweet, Izana," he breathed.

"Peace ..." Izana whispered, before kissing Rand's cheek. The rocking of his hips slowed uncertainly with the end of Rand's spurting. He was such a conscientious boy.

Rand brushed his fingers against his pretty face. "Keep going, Izana. I want you to come again. You deserve it," he whispered. "Move those sexy hips. Ride my cock with your tight little ass. Rub your pretty cock against me." He did everything Rand asked, right up to the last. "Come for me, Izana."

Once again his mouth and eyes squeezed shut in a vain effort to hide his pleasure. Rand could feel it in the wetness that spread between their bellies. When it finished spreading, he let out a shuddering breath and returned his chin to Rand's shoulder.

He combed his fingers through Izana's loose hair as he trembled in orgasmic bliss. He liked sitting like that, on his heels with Izana in his lap, both of them hot and sweaty and trembling with shared pleasure. It felt so intimate, and filled a place inside Rand he had no name for.

His cock was no longer filling Izana quite so much, however. For all the difficulties they'd had, Izana gripped it with his butt when he felt it shrinking away. He couldn't stop that, but he could stop the combing of Rand's fingers.

"Don't you need to rest?" he asked, sitting up and holding him by the hand. "You were amazing, Rand! Really!"

"So were you," he mumbled tiredly.

Izana climbed from his lap. Despite everything, he still blushed over the state of them both. "I'm sorry I made such a mess. I'll clean it right away."

Rand waved that off. "It's nothing," he said, and fell to the bed.

"I'm sorry, my lo-lord, but that is just not so. You need clean sheets to sleep on," Izana insisted. He had to be as drained and sleepy as Rand felt, but he hustled about in the nude, using a bunched corner of the top sheet to wipe off first Rand and then himself. He even carefully wiped Rand's flaccid cock clean, if only after a shy, questioning look. He gathered the sheet afterwards, the one that Rand was still lying on. In a flash of perversity, Rand pretended not to notice his pleading look. Only after Izana had worked up the courage to apologetically ask him to roll over did he get off and allow him to bundle the dirty sheet and place it near the door.

As much as he enjoyed the sight of his naked butt moving, Rand shook his head in exasperation. "Come to bed, Izana," he said as he got under the remaining sheets.

Izana froze. "With you?"

"Of course. After what we did, why wouldn't you?"

"A-are you sure that's ... okay?"

Rand was confused. "I think so. But if you don't want to ..."

"I want to! Let me get you a drink first. You must be thirsty," he said, rushing over to the carved and gilded table in the far corner.

Rand was, he had to admit. "Thanks. Pour one for yourself while you're there."

"You are too kind, my lord. I believe I will."

He did, and drank at once. The relieved noise he made told him it was long overdue. Rand almost made a similar one when a naked Izana carried two glasses over to him. He drank deep, both of the sight and of the water, then set the glass on a bedside table. Izana moved around to the other side of the bed and set his glass there, but then hesitated yet again.

It fell to Rand to, smiling, pull the covers aside and invite him in. He smiled so sweetly when he did, though, and managed yet another blush as he was climbing in, so he could not find it in himself to be anything but charmed.

"I really enjoyed this," Rand said as they lay on their backs under the sheets.

"So did I," Izana said at once. It was so long before he continued that Rand thought he was already falling asleep. "Rand ... I'm glad we did this, and I don't want you to think me greedy or disloyal, but—"

He had to snort. "I'd think Loial foul-tempered first."

Light laughter was his response, but Izana continued in a serious voice. "I was just wondering if this was ... was to be a singular precious gift, o-or ... or ..."

"I don't want it be the last time," Rand admitted. But his thoughts already ran ahead. Izana was bound for Tear with Uno. How often would Rand have the time to visit the training camps? How often could they see each other? All too rarely, was the inescapable answer. *Idiot! Why did you not realise what you had beside you until it was gone?*

Izana wasn't quite gone yet, however. And wasn't yet done being bold that night. "My Lord Dragon. I will go where you order, of course. To Shayol Ghul itself if you say it. But can I not stay with you? Uno knows far more about war than I do; I haven't been a soldier very long at all. I don't see what I could teach anyone."

"I'd like that ..." Rand said, "but if I make an exception for you ..." The Shienaran armsmen had been every bit as jealous as the Aiel men when it came to the "honour" of guarding Rand. Excuses concerning the obligations of a son born to a Maiden, or the need to avoid offending the Aiel in general, went only so far. How was he to excuse sending Geko and the others away but keeping Izana, after all they'd done for him?

Izana was as Shienaran as the others. He understood. But still he persisted. "I had a thought earlier. You are recruiting staff, aren't you? I could do a much better job than that Jubes girl. And it might be useful for you to have a servant who knows at least a little of fighting."

"You know more than a little," Rand said. Young as he was, Izana had survived more combat than most officers in most armies. So had Rand for that matter, the Light help them both.

Izana rolled onto his side, intent and earnest. "Exactly! I know I don't look it either, which could surprise your enemies. You trust me, don't you? You must know I would serve faithfully. So what if I cut my topknot and left the army? O-only with your permission, of course, but if I did, you could hire me as a servant instead. Then I wouldn't have to leave. I don't want to leave, Rand." He reached over and placed his hand atop Rand's chest, just over his heart. "Please."

"You'd cut your topknot?" he said, surprised. It was a serious thing, among Shienarans. All the warriors of that land wore their hair that way, and shaved the rest of their skulls. "Don't you want to be a soldier?"

Izana didn't hesitate. "I want to be with you."

Rand shuffled close enough to wrap his arm around his shoulders. "Then you will be. We'll make it work, just the way you said."

He wrapped his arms around Rand's neck in response, hugging tight. "Oh, thank you. Peace. I thought ... I've thought so many stupid things ..."

"Well. We should both stop doing that," Rand said dryly. Izana laughed that time, and cuddled up against Rand, naked in his bed.

That was nice. It would be nice if the others understood as well. Who could he pair up with Uno? He didn't want anyone having to run such a camp without a single familiar face around. Areku might be a good choice. She was less suited to command than some. Ragan should be in charge of another, of course. And ...

Despite everything, from the wondrous post-sex lassitude, to the clean sheets and the comforting warmth of Izana's closeness, Rand was still planning when sleep finally forced his thoughts to welcome stillness.

It felt far too soon when the dawn's light coming through the window made him crack his eyes open. The lamps had not yet burnt out. It was more habit than brightness that disturbed Rand's sleep. Izana was still cuddled against him and welcome to be so, but Rand's back called out for him to shift position. His efforts to do so subtly failed.

Izana woke with a sharp breath. "What's the matter? Uh ... When did I fall asleep?"

"I have no idea what time it was," Rand admitted. He ran his hand across smooth skin, shifting on the bed. His back wasn't the only thing that was stiff. "It was an eventful night."

Izana got up on one elbow. Memories danced in his eyes, replacing the sleep he dashed from them. "A wonderful night," he said with a sweet smile.

It called for a kiss, and Rand was happy to provide one. "Very. Get some more sleep, I need to get to work." He had training with Lan that morning. And another meeting with Lady Colavaere and her smiling puppets in the evening.

Izana shook his head. “What kind of servant would I be if I slept while my master was working? I’ll get your breakfast. You should rest here.”

Neither of them rushed to push free of the bedsheets and get up, though. In Rand’s case it was because he was already “up”. Izana was watching him, too, with a nervousness Rand hoped he wasn’t echoing.

The Shienaran cleared his throat delicately. “Is there anything else you’d like me to help you with?”

Blood and ashes! He knew. But then, he was a fellow man. Among other things. Rand chewed his lip. “You don’t have to do anything for me.”

“I do! And even if I didn’t, I’d want to,” Izana said. He got on his belly and hugged a pillow to his cheek. His eyes never left Rand’s as he shifted on the bed until his hips were angled towards him. “I told you. I am yours.”

Burn me, Rand thought. Work and breakfast would just have to wait a bit. He spent the first hour of his day teasing open Izana’s so tight ass, and listening to his cute moans as Rand held him tightly from behind and drove his hips into the silk sheets. It was a fine, fine way to start the new day.

CHAPTER 20: News Comes to Cairhien



A thin thread of blue smoke rising from the plain, short-stemmed pipe clenched in his teeth, Rand rested one hand on the balcony's stone railing and looked into the garden below. Sharp shadows were lengthening; the sun was a red ball falling through a cloudless sky. Ten days in Cairhien, and this seemed the first moment he had stood still when he was not asleep. Selande stood close by his side, pale face tilted up to watch him, not the garden. Her hair was not so elaborately done as that of a woman of higher rank, but it still added half a foot to her height. He tried to ignore her, but it was difficult to ignore a woman who insisted on pressing her firm bosom against your arm. The meeting had gone on long enough for him to want a moment's break. He had known it for a mistake as soon as Selande followed him out.

"I know a secluded pool," she said softly, "where this heat might be escaped. A sheltered pool, where nothing would disturb us." The music of Asmodean's harp drifted out through the square arches behind them. Something light, cool sounding.

Rand puffed a little more vigorously. The heat. Nothing compared to the Waste, but ... Autumn should be coming on, yet the afternoon felt like the depths of summer. A rainless summer. Shirt-sleeved men in the garden were spreading water from buckets, doing it late to avoid evaporation, but too much was brown or dying. The weather could not be natural. The burning sun mocked him. Moiraine agreed, and Asmodean, but neither knew what to do or how, any more than he did. Sammael. Sammael he could do something about. A trap was only a trap if you didn't see it.

"Cool water," Selande murmured, "and you and I alone." She snuggled closer, though he did not see how it was possible.

He wondered when the next taunt would come. No dashing off in a temper, whatever Sammael did. Even if Lanfear had not warned him, he would have known that. Once his methodical buildup in Tear was done, then he would loose the lightning. One crushing stroke to put an end to Sammael, and add Illian to his bag at the same time. It might be best to move on Ghealdan, too, perhaps while preparing for Illian, since it sat athwart his march and could prove a stumbling block. With Illian, Ghealdan, Tear and Cairhien, plus an army of Aiel big enough to overwhelm any nation in weeks, he ...

"Would you not like to swim? I do not swim well myself, but surely you will teach me."

Rand sighed. For a moment he wished Aviendha was there. No. The last thing he wanted was a bruised Selande running screaming with her clothes half torn off.

Hoarding his eyes, he looked down at her and spoke quietly around his pipe. "I can channel." She blinked, drawing back without moving a muscle. They never understood why he would bring that up; for them it was something to be glossed over, ignored if possible. "They say I'll go mad. But I'm not mad yet. Not yet." He chuckled from deep in his chest, then cut it off abruptly, made his face blank. "Teach you to swim? I'll hold you up in the water with the Power. *Saidin* is tainted, you know. The Dark One's touch. You won't feel it, though. All around you, but you'll not feel a thing." Another chuckle, with a hint of a wheeze. Her dark eyes were as wide and round as they would go, her smile a sickly rictus. "Later, then. I want to be alone, to think about ..." He bent as if to kiss her, and with a squeak, she dropped a curtsy so sudden that at first he thought her legs had collapsed.

Backing away, curtsying hurriedly at every other step, she babbled about the honour of serving him, her deepest wish to serve him, all in a voice on the brink of hysteria, until she bumped into one of the square arches. A final, half-bend of her knees, and she darted inside.

With a grimace, he turned back to the railing. Frightening women. She would have made excuses had he asked her to leave him, would have taken a command as only a temporary setback unless it was to stay out of his sight, and even then ... Maybe word would spread this time. He had to keep a short rein on his temper; it ran away too easily of late. It was the drought he could do nothing about, the problems that sprang up like weeds wherever he looked. A few moments more alone with

his pipe. Who would rule a nation when he could have easier work, such as carrying water uphill in a sieve?

Across the garden, between two of the Royal Palace's stepped towers, he had a view of Cairhien, harshly lit and shadowed, mastering the hills more than flowing over them. His crimson flag with the ancient Aes Sedai symbol hung limply above one of those two towers, a long copy of the Dragon Banner over the other. That one flew a dozen places in the city, including the tallest of the great unfinished towers, right in front of him. Shouting had done as little as orders there; neither Tairens nor Cairhienin could believe he really meant that he only wanted one, and Aiel did not care about banners one way or another.

Even now, deep inside the palace, he could hear the murmur of a city jammed to bursting. Refugees from every corner of the land, more afraid to return to their homes than they were to have the Dragon Reborn in their midst. Merchants seeping in, selling whatever people could afford to buy and buying whatever people could not afford to keep. Lords and armed men rallying to his banner, or to someone's. Hunters for the Horn thinking it must be found near him; a dozen Foregaters, or a hundred, were ready to sell it to any of them. Ogier stonemasons up from Stedding Tsofu to see if there was work for their fabled skills. Adventurers, some of whom might have been bandits a week gone, come to see what they could pick up. There had even been a hundred or so Whitecloaks, though they had galloped out as soon as it was clear the siege had been lifted. Did Pedron Niall's ingathering of the Whitecloaks concern him? Elayne gave him hints of things, but she saw matters from the White Tower perspective a lot of the time. The Aes Sedai point of view was not his.

At least the barges full of grain were beginning to arrive from Tear with some regularity. Hungry people could riot. He wished he could have simply left it at being glad they were not so hungry anymore, but there it was. The bandits were fewer. And the civil war had not resumed. Yet. More good news. He had to make certain it stayed that way before he could leave. A hundred things to take care of before he could go after Sammael. Only Rhuarc and Bael remained of the chiefs he really trusted, those who had marched from Rhuidean with him. But if the four clans who had joined him late could not be trusted on the march to Tear, could he trust them loose in Cairhien? Indirian and the others had acknowledged him as *Car'a'carn*, but they knew him as little as he knew them. The message that morning might be a problem. Berelain, First of Mayene, was only a few hundred miles south of the city, on her way to join him with a small army. No doubt she feared Rand might forget her small country if she did not remind him. It might almost be a pleasure to watch her spar with the Cairhienin, the latest in a long line of Firsts who had managed to keep Tear from swallowing their country by playing the Game of Houses. It would be very much a pleasure to see her again. Perhaps if he put her in charge here ... He would be taking Meilan and the other Tairens with him when the time came. If it ever came.

This was no better than what was waiting inside. Tapping the dottle from his pipe, he ground out the tabac's last sparks under his boot. No need to risk fire to the garden; it would go up like a torch. The drought. The unnatural weather. He realized he was snarling silently. First work on what he knew he could do something about. It took an effort to smooth his face before he went in.

Asmodean, as well dressed as any lord, with falls of lace at his neck, plucked a soothing melody from his harp in one corner, leaning against the dark severe panelling as if lounging at his leisure. The others who were sitting bobbed out of their chairs at Rand's appearance, and back down at his sharp gesture. Meilan, Torean and Aracome occupied carved-and-gilded chairs on one side of the deep red and gold carpet, each with a young Tairen lord at his back, mirroring the Cairhienin on the other side. Dobraine and Maringil had a young lord apiece behind them, too, each with the front of his head shaved and powdered like Dobraine's. A white-faced Selande stood at Colavaere's shoulder, and trembled when Rand looked at her.

Schooling his face, he strode down the carpet to his own chair. That chair alone was reason to control his features. It was a new gift from Colavaere and the other two, in what they imagined was the Tairen style. He must like Tairen gaudiness; he ruled Tear, had sent them here. Carved Dragons held it up, all sparkling red and gold with enamel and gilt, and great sunstones for their golden eyes. Two more made the arms, and others climbed the tall back. Countless craftsmen must have gone without sleep since his arrival to make the thing. He felt like a fool sitting on it. Asmodean's music had changed; it had a grand sound, now, a triumphal march.

And yet, there was an added wariness in those dark Cairhienin eyes watching him, a wariness reflected in the Tairens. It had been there before he went outside, too. Perhaps in attempting to curry favour they had made a mistake that was only now dawning on them. They had all tried to ignore who he was, pretend he was simply some young lord who had conquered them, who could be dealt with and manipulated. That chair—that throne—held up in front of them who and what he really was, as surely as did the watchful Aiel who lined the walls.

“Are the soldiers moving on schedule, Lord Dobraine?” The harp faded away as soon as he opened his mouth, Asmodean apparently absorbed in preening it.

The leathery man smiled grimly. “They are, my Lord Dragon.” No more than that. Rand had no illusions that Dobraine liked him more than any of the others did, or that he would not try to gain advantage where he could, but Dobraine actually seemed ready to hold to the oath he had sworn. The colourful slashes down the chest of his coat were worn from a breastplate being buckled over them.

Maringil shifted forward on his chair, whip-slender and tall for a Cairhienin, white hair almost touching his shoulders. His forehead was not shaved, and his coat, stripes nearly to his knees, bore no visible wear. “We need those men here, my Lord Dragon.” Hawk’s eyes blinked at the gilded throne, focused on Rand again. “There are many bandits at large in the land yet.” He shifted again, so he did not have to look at the Tairens. Meilan and the other two were smiling faintly.

“I have set Aiel to hunting bandits,” Rand said. They did have orders to sweep up any brigands in their path. And to not go out of their way to find them. Even Aiel could not do that and move quickly. “I’m told that three days ago, Stone Dogs killed nearly two hundred near Morelle.” That was near the southernmost line claimed by Cairhien in recent years. No need to let this lot know that those Aiel might have reached Maerone and its bridge by now, and crossed the river. They could cover long distances faster than horses.

Maringil persisted, frowning uneasily. “There is another reason. There are rumours of Andoran armies marshalling on the other side of the Alguenya.” He hesitated. They all knew Rand had grown up in Andor; a dozen rumours made him a son of one Andoran House or another, even a son of Morgase herself, either cast off because he could channel or fled before he could be Gentled. The slender man went on as if tiptoeing barefoot and blindfolded among daggers. “Morgase does not seem to be reaching for more as yet, but her heralds have proclaimed her right to the—” He stopped abruptly. None of them knew who Rand meant the Sun Throne for. Maybe it was Morgase.

Colavaere’s dark gaze had Rand on balance scales again; she had said little today. She would not until she learned why Selande’s face was so white.

Suddenly Rand was tired, of nobles balking, of all the manoeuvring in *Daes Dae’mar*. “Andoran claims to Cairhien will be taken care of when I am ready. Those soldiers will go to Tear. You will follow the High Lord Meilan’s good example of obedience, and I’ll hear no more on it.” He swung toward the Tairens. “Your example is a good one, Meilan, isn’t it? And yours, Aracome? If I ride out tomorrow, I won’t find a thousand Defenders of the Stone camped ten miles south who were supposed to be on their way back to Tear two days ago, will I? Or two thousand armsmen from Tairen Houses?”

Those faint smiles faded with each word. Meilan became very still, dark eyes glittering, and Aracome’s narrow face went pale, whether from anger or fear it was hard to say. Torean dabbed at his lumpy face with a silk handkerchief pulled from his sleeve. Rand ruled in Tear, and meant to rule; *Callandor* driven into the Heart of the Stone proved that. That was why they had not protested against his sending Tairen soldiers to Cairhien. They thought to carve new estates, perhaps kingdoms, here, far from where he ruled.

“You will not, my Lord Dragon,” Meilan said finally. “Tomorrow I will ride with you so you may see for yourself.”

Rand did not doubt it. A rider would be dispatched south as soon as the man could arrange it, and by tomorrow those soldiers would be far on toward Tear. It would do. For now. “I am done, then. You may leave me.”

A few starts of surprise, masked so quickly they might have been imagined, and they were rising, bowing and curtsying, Selande and the young lords backing away. They had expected more. An audience with the Dragon Reborn was always long, and tortuous as they saw it, with him firmly bending them the way he meant them to go, whether it was declaring that no Tairen could claim lands

in Cairhien without marrying into a Cairhienin House, or refusing to allow the expulsion of Foregaters, or making laws apply to nobles that had never applied to any but commoners before.

His eyes followed Selande for a moment. She was not the first in the last ten days. Nor the tenth or even the twentieth. He had been tempted, at least at first. When he rejected slender, plump promptly replaced her, as tall or dark, for Cairhienin anyway, replaced short or fair. A constant search for the woman who would please him. The Maidens turned back those who tried to sneak into his quarters at night, firmly but more gently than Aviendha had handled the one she caught. Aviendha apparently took Elayne's ownership of him with little short of deadly seriousness. Yet her Aiel sense of humour seemed to find tormenting him very satisfying; he had seen the satisfaction on her face when he groaned and hid his face as she started undressing for the night. Thus he could have resented her deadly seriousness if he had not quickly understood what was behind that string of pretty young women.

"My Lady Colavaere."

She stopped as soon as he spoke her name, cool-eyed and calm beneath her ornate tower of dark curls. Selande had no choice but to remain with her, though she was plainly as reluctant to stay as the others were to go. Meilan and Maringil bowed themselves out last, so intent on Colavaere and trying to puzzle out why she had been called to stay that they did not realize they were side by side. Their eyes were a perfect match, dark and predatory.

The dark-panelled door closed. "Selande is very pretty young woman," Rand said. "But some prefer the company of a more mature ... more knowledgeable ... woman. You will sup alone with me tonight, when Second Even is rung. I look forward to the pleasure." He waved her away before she could say anything, if she could have. Her face did not change, but her curtsy was a trifle unsteady. Selande looked purely amazed. And infinitely relieved.

Once the door had closed again, behind the two women, Rand threw back his head and laughed. A harsh, sardonic laugh. He was tired of the Game of Houses, so he played it without thinking. He was disgusted with himself for frightening one woman, so he frightened another. It was reason enough to laugh. Colavaere stood behind that line of young women who had been flinging themselves at him. Find a bedpartner for the Lord Dragon, a young woman whose strings she pulled, and Colavaere would have a string tied firmly to Rand. But it was some other woman she meant to bed, and perhaps even marry, the Dragon Reborn. Now she would sweat all the hours until Second Even. She had to know she was pretty, if short of beautiful, and if he rebuffed all the young women she sent, perhaps it was because he wanted one with another fifteen or so years. And she would be certain she did not dare say no to the man who held Cairhien in his fist. By tonight, she should be amenable, should stop this idiocy. Aviendha would very likely slit the throat of any strange woman she found in his bed; besides, he had no time for all these easily frightened doves thinking to sacrifice themselves for Cairhien and Colavaere. There were too many problems to deal with, and no time.

"You are right to laugh, Rand al'Thor," claimed Nici. "Their clothes are okay but they are not so pretty."

"They were pretty enough," he muttered. It was the condescension that had bothered him, not the thought of having a Cairhienin lady for company. Colavaere genuinely thought him too stupid to see through her ploy. Was it his youth, his barbaric Aiel blood, or the simple fact that he was a man? Whatever her reasoning, the implied insult put Rand's back up. "Don't be mean."

The young Maiden didn't look very chastened. "I am not mean. It is only that I am too truthful to be good."

Rand sighed, but more over the situation than Nici's familiar antics. *Light, what if Colavaere decides it's worth the sacrifice?* She might. She was easily cold-blooded enough. *Then I'll have to see that it's cold with fear.* It would not be difficult. He could sense *saidin* like something just beyond the edge of sight. He could feel the taint on it. Sometimes he thought that what he felt was the taint in him, now, the dregs left by *saidin*.

"I won't need any more guards tonight," he said. The Aiel started to leave, but casually. Even Nici had little to say for some reason.

He found that he was glaring at Asmodean. The man seemed to be studying him, face expressionless. The music resumed again once the last Aiel filed out, like water babbling over stones, soothing. So he needed soothing, did he?

The door opened without a knock, admitting Moiraine, Dani, Pedra and Aviendha together, the latter's Aiel garb looking starkly drab compared to the Aes Sedai's pale blue, or the Accepted pair in their wide-skirted and high-necked Cairhienin dresses of uncommonly bright colour. For anyone else, even Rhuarc or another chief still near the city or yet another delegation of Wise Ones, a Maiden would have entered to announce them. For Pedra alone as well. The other three the Maidens sent on in even if he was taking a bath. Pedra glanced at "Natael" and grimaced, and the tune became lower, and for a moment intricate, perhaps a dance, before settling to what might have been the sighing of breezes. The man wore a twisted smile, directed at his harp.

"What do you want?" he said.

"These came for you in the last hour," Moiraine said, extending two folded letters. Her voice seemed to fit Asmodean's chime-like tune.

Rand rose to take them suspiciously. "If they're for me, how did they come into your hands?" One was addressed to "Rand al'Thor" in an exact, angular hand, the other to "The Lord Dragon Reborn" in script flowing yet no less precise. The seals were unbroken. A second look made him blink. The two seals seemed to be the same red wax, and one bore the impression of the Flame of Tar Valon, the other a tower overlaid on what he recognized as the island of Tar Valon.

"Perhaps because of where they came from," Moiraine replied, "and from whom." It was no explanation, but it was as much as he would get unless he demanded more. Even then he would have to prod her through every step. She kept her vow, but in her own way. "There are no poison needles in the seals. And no traps woven."

He paused with his thumb against the Flame of Tar Valon—he had not thought of either—then broke it. Another Flame in red wax stood beside the signature, Elaida do Avriny a'Roihan in a hasty scrawl above her titles. The rest was in the angular hand.

There can be no denial that you are the one prophesied, yet many will try to destroy you for what else you are. For the sake of the world, this cannot be allowed. Two nations have bent knee to you, and the savage Aiel as well, but the power of thrones is as dust beside the One Power. The White Tower will shelter and protect you against those who refuse to see what must be. The White Tower will see that you live to see Tarmon Gai'don. None else can do this. An escort of Aes Sedai will come to bring you to Tar Valon with the honour and respect you deserve. This I pledge to you.

"She doesn't even ask," he said wryly. He remembered Elaida well for having met her only once. A woman hard enough to make Moiraine seem a kitten. The "honour and respect" he deserved. He would wager that the escort of Aes Sedai just happened to number thirteen.

Passing Elaida's letter back to Moiraine, he opened the other. The page was covered in the same hand that had addressed it.

With respect, I humbly beg to make myself known to the great Lord Dragon Reborn, whom the Light blesses as saviour of the world.

All the world must stand in awe of you, who has conquered Cairhien in one day as you did Tear. Yet be wary, I beseech you, for your splendour will inspire jealousy even in those not toiled in the Shadow. Even here in the White Tower are the blind who cannot see your true radiance, which will illumine us all. Yet know that some rejoice in your coming, and will delight to serve your glory. We are not those who would steal your lustre for ourselves, but rather those who would kneel to bask in your brilliance. You shall save the world, according to the Prophecies, and the world shall be yours.

To my shame, I must beg you to let no-one see these words, and to destroy them when once read. I stand, naked of your protection, among some who would usurp your power, and I cannot know who around you is as faithful as I. I am told that Moiraine Damodred may be with you. She may serve you devotedly, obeying your words as law, as I will, yet I cannot know, for I remember her as a secretive woman, much given to plotting, as Cairhienin are. Yet even if you believe she is your creature, as I, I beg you to keep this missive secret, even from her. My life lies beneath your fingers, my Lord Dragon Reborn, and I am your servant.

Alviarin Freidhen

He read it through again, blinking, then handed it to Moiraine. She barely scanned the page before giving it to Dani, who had her head over the other letter with Aviendha and Pedra. Perhaps Moiraine already knew what they contained?

"A good thing you gave your oath," he said. "The way you used to be, keeping everything back, I might have been ready to suspect you by now. A good thing you're more open now." She did not react. "What do you make of it?"

"She must have heard about your swelled head," Pedra said softly. He did not think he had been meant to hear. Shaking her head, she said more loudly, "This doesn't sound like Alviarin at all."

"It is her hand," Moiraine said. "What do *you* make of it, Rand?"

"I think there's a rift in the Tower, whether Elaida knows it or not. I assume an Aes Sedai can't write a lie more easily than she can speak one?" He did not wait for her nod. "If Alviarin had been less flowery, I might have thought they were working together to pull me in. I can't see Elaida even thinking half of what Alviarin wrote, and I can't see her having a Keeper who could write it, not if she knew."

"You are not going to do this thing," Aviendha said, Elaida's letter crumpled in her hand. It was not a question.

"I am not a fool."

"Sometimes you are not," she said grudgingly, and made it worse by raising a questioning eyebrow to Dani, who considered for a moment, then shrugged.

"Do you see anything else?" Moiraine asked.

"I see White Tower spies," he told her dryly. "They know I hold the city." For at least two or three days after the battle, the Shaido would have stopped anything but a pigeon going north. Even a rider who knew where to change horses, no sure thing between Cairhien and Tar Valon, could not have reached the Tower in time for these letters to come back today.

Moiraine smiled. "You learn quickly. You will do well." For a moment she almost looked fond. "What will you do about it?"

"Nothing, except make sure that Elaida's 'escort' doesn't get within a mile of me." Thirteen of the weakest Aes Sedai could overwhelm him linked, and he did not think Elaida would send her weakest. "That, and be aware that the Tower knows what I do the day after I do it. Nothing more until I know more. Could Alviarin be one of the rebels?"

"Aes Sedai are not rebels," Pedra said sharply.

Rand snorted. "The women organising a rebellion against the new Amyrlin, then. Who are totally not rebels. That sit easier with you?"

It didn't. Not that he cared.

Dani came and perched casually on the arm of Rand's ridiculous chair, one arm draped across the back. "Who knows what side she's on? There are getting to be far too many of them for my taste." She lowered her voice for him alone. "I'm wondering ... if I dare trust the others anymore." Her face was a beautiful mask but she was looking at Pedra as she spoke. Had something been said when the letters arrived? Pedra had never liked him, nor he her.

A rap came at the door, and Somara put her flaxen head into the room. "Matrim Cauthon has come, *Car'a'carn*. He says that you sent for him."

Four hours ago, as soon as he had learned Mat was back in the city. What would the excuse be this time? It was time to be done with excuses. "Stay," he told the women. Wise Ones made Mat almost as uneasy as Aes Sedai did; these four would put him off balance. He did not give a second thought to using them. He was going to use Mat, too. "Send him in, Somara."

Mat strolled into the room grinning, as if it was a common room. His green coat hung open, and his shirt was half unlaced, exposing the silver foxhead dangling on his sweaty chest, but the dark silk scarf was draped around his neck to hide his hanging scar in spite of the heat. "Sorry if I took too long. There were some Cairhienin who thought they knew how to play cards. Doesn't he know anything livelier?" he asked, jerking his head toward Asmodean.

"I hear," Rand said, "that every young man who can pick up a sword wants to join the Band of the Red Hand. Talmanes and Nalesean are having to turn them away in droves. And Daerid has doubled the number of his footmen."

Mat paused in lowering himself into the chair Aracome had used. "It's true. A fine lot of young ... fellows wanting to be heroes."

“The Band of the Red Hand,” Moiraine murmured. “*Shen an Calhar*. A legendary group of heroes indeed, though the men in it must have changed many times in a war that lasted well over three hundred years. It is said they were the last to fall to the Trollocs, guarding Aemon himself, when Manetheren died. Legend says a spring rose where they fell, to mark their passing, but I rather think the spring was already there.”

“I wouldn’t know about that.” Mat touched the foxhead medallion, and his voice picked up strength. “Some fool got the name from somewhere, and they all started using it.”

Moiraine glanced at the medallion dismissively. The small blue stone hanging on the forehead seemed to catch the light and glow, though the angles were wrong. “You are very brave, it seems, Mat.” It was flatly said, and the silence that followed stiffened his face. “Very brave,” she said finally, “to lead *Shen an Calhar* across the Alguenya and south against the Andorans. Even braver than that, for there are rumours that you went alone to scout the way, and Talmanes and Nalesean had to ride hard to catch up to you.” Pedra sniffed loudly in the background. “Hardly wise for a young lord leading his men.”

Mat’s lip curled. “I’m no lord. I’ve more respect for myself than that.”

“But very brave,” Moiraine said as if he had not spoken. “Andoran supply wagons burned, outposts destroyed. And three battles. Three battles, and three victories. With small loss to your own men, though outnumbered.” As she fingered a rip in the shoulder of his coat, he sank back as far the chair would allow. “Are you drawn to the thick of battles, or are they drawn to you? I am almost surprised you came back. To hear the stories, you might have driven the Andorans back to their own borders had you stayed.”

“Do you think this is funny?” Mat snarled. “If you have something to say, say it. You can play the cat all you want, but I’m no mouse.” For an instant his eyes flickered toward the other women, watching with folded arms, and he fingered the silver foxhead again. He had to be wondering. It had stopped one woman’s channelling from touching him. Would it stop four?

Rand only watched. Watched his friend being softened for what he meant to do to him. *Is there anything left to me but necessity?* It was a quick thought, there and gone. He would do what he must.

The Aes Sedai’s voice gained a rime of crystal frost as she spoke, almost in an echo. “We all do as we must, as the Pattern decrees. For some there is less freedom than for others. It does not matter whether we choose or are chosen. What must be, must be.”

Mat did not look softened at all. Wary, yes, and certainly angry, but not softened. He could have been a tomcat backed into a corner by four hounds. A tomcat who meant to go down hard. He seemed to have forgotten anyone was in the room except for himself and the four women. “You always have to push a man where you want him, don’t you? Kick him there, if he won’t go led by the nose. Blood and bloody ashes! Don’t glare at me, Pedra, I’ll speak the way I want. Burn me! All it needs is for Nynaeve to be here, yanking her braid out of her head, and Elayne staring down her nose. Well, I’m glad she isn’t, to hear the news, but even if you had Nynaeve, I’d not be shoved—”

“What news?” Rand said sharply. “News Elayne shouldn’t hear?”

Mat looked up at Moiraine. “You mean there’s something you haven’t ferreted out?”

“What news, Mat?” Rand demanded.

“Morgase is dead.”

Dani gasped, clasping both hands to her mouth below eyes like huge circles, while Pedra scowled at Mat. Moiraine whispered something that might have been a prayer. Asmodean’s fingers never faltered on the harp.

Rand felt as if his belly had been ripped out. *Elayne, forgive me*. And a faint echo, altered. *Ilyena, forgive me*. “Are you certain?”

“As certain as I can be without seeing the body. It seems Gaebril has been named King of Andor. And Cairhien, too, for that matter. Supposedly Morgase did it. Something about the times needing a strong man’s hand or some such, as if anybody could have a stronger than Morgase herself. Only, those Andorans down south have heard rumours that she hasn’t been seen in weeks. More than rumours. You tell me what it adds up to. Andor’s never had a king, but now it has one, and the queen’s vanished. Gaebril’s the one wanted Elayne killed. I tried to tell her that, but you know how she always knows more than a mudfooted farmer. I don’t think he’d balk a second at slitting a queen’s throat.”

Rand discovered that he was sitting in one of the chairs across from Mat, though he did not remember moving. Aviendha laid a hand on his shoulder. Concern tightened her eyes. "I am alright," he said roughly. "There's no need to send for Somara." Her face reddened, but he hardly noticed.

Elayne would never be able to forgive him. He had known that Rahvin—Gaebril—held Morgase prisoner, but he had ignored it because the Forsaken might expect him to help her. He had gone his own way, to do what they did not expect. And ended chasing Couladin instead of doing what he planned. He had known, and concentrated his attention on Sammael. Because the man taunted him. Morgase could wait while he smashed Sammael's trap and Sammael with it. He hadn't even warned her in *Tel'aran'rhiod*, accepting any and all excuses to delay telling her and having to explain why he wasn't rushing to the rescue. And so Morgase was dead. Elayne's mother was dead. Elayne would curse him to her deathbed.

"I'll tell you one thing," Mat was going on. "There are a lot of queen's men down there. They are not so sure about fighting for a king. You find Elayne. Half of them will flock to you to put her on the—"

"Shut up!" Rand barked. He quivered so hard with fury that Pedra stepped back, and even Moiraine eyed him carefully. Aviendha's hand tightened on his shoulder, but he shook it off as he stood. Morgase dead because he had done nothing. His own hand had been on the knife as surely as Rahvin's. *Elayne*. "She will be avenged. Rahvin, Mat. Not Gaebril. Rahvin. I'll lay him by the heel if I never do another thing!"

"Oh, blood and bloody ashes!" Mat groaned.

"This is madness." Pedra flinched as if realizing what she had said, but she kept that firm voice. "You have your hands full with Cairhien yet, not to mention the Shaido to the north and whatever it is you're planning in Tear. Do you mean to start another war, with two on your plate already and a ruined land besides?"

"Not a war. Me. I can be in Caemlyn in an hour. A raid—right, Mat?—a raid, not a war. I'll rip Rahvin's heart out." His voice was a hammer. He felt as if acid filled his veins. "I could wish I had Elaida's thirteen sisters to take with me, to smother him, and bring him to justice. Tried and hung for murder. That would be justice. But he'll just have to die however I can kill him."

Dani was back on her feet, frowning in concern. "Just like that? It's a Forsaken you're talking about! Aren't you going to at least get *Callandor* first?"

Dead mothers and dead children ... "No! I don't need it. I'm stronger now." And he had his *angreal* besides.

Her mask was back in place. It looked too Aes Sedai for him. Just thinking of her so set him on edge. "Elayne deserves to hear about her mother. From you. It isn't right not to tell her. You should arrange a meeting in *Tel'aran'rhiod* tonight."

That all sounded very reasonable but ... then he'd have to face her.

Moiraine spoke while he was still wrestling with himself. "*Tel'aran'rhiod* is still off limits, you will recall. That conversation must wait. As must the Forsaken's fate. Tomorrow would be better," she said softly.

Rand glared at her. And so did Dani. But she was right. Tomorrow would be better. A night to let his rage cool.

He needed to be cold when he faced Rahvin. Now he wanted to seize *saidin* and lay about him, destroying. Asmodean's music had changed again, to a tune that street musicians in the city had played during the civil war. You could still hear it sometimes when a Cairhienin noble passed. "The Fool Who Thought He Was King." "Get out, Natael. Get out!"

Asmodean straightened smoothly, bowing, but his face could have done for snow, and he crossed the room quickly, as if uncertain what one second more might bring. He always pushed, but perhaps this time he had pushed too far. As he opened the door, Rand spoke again.

"I will see you tonight. Or I will see you dead."

Asmodean's bow was not so graceful this time. "As my Lord Dragon commands," he said hoarsely, and hurriedly pulled the door shut with him on the other side.

The four women looked at Rand, expressionless, not blinking.

"The rest of you go, too." Mat practically bounded toward the door. "Not you. I have things to say to you yet."

Mat stopped short, sighing loudly and fiddling with his medallion. He was the only one who had moved.

"You do not have thirteen Aes Sedai," Aviendha said, "but you have six. And myself. I may not know as much as Moiraine Sedai, but I am stronger, and I am no stranger to the dance." She meant the dance of spears, what the Aiel called battle.

"Rahvin is mine," he told her quietly. Maybe Elayne could forgive him a little if he at least avenged her mother. Probably not, but maybe he could forgive himself. A little. He forced his hands to stay at his sides, to not make fists.

"Will you draw a line on the ground for him to step over?" Pedra scoffed. "Put a chip on your shoulder? Have you considered that Rahvin might not be alone if he calls himself King of Andor now? Much good it will do when you appear if one of his guards puts an arrow through your heart."

"Did you think I meant to go alone?" He had; he had never thought of anyone to guard his back, though now he could hear a small whisper, *He likes to come from behind, or at your flanks*. He could hardly think clearly at all. His anger seemed to have a life of its own, stoking the fires that kept it boiling. "But not you. This is dangerous. Moiraine can come if she wishes."

Dani and Aviendha did not look at one another before stepping forward, but they moved as one, not stopping until they were so close even Aviendha had to tilt her head back to look up at him.

"Moiraine can come if she wishes," Dani said.

If her voice was smooth ice, Aviendha's was molten stone. "But it is too dangerous for us."

"Have you become my father? Is your name Jonalem?"

"If you have four spears, do you put three aside because they are newer made?"

"I do not want to risk you," he said stiffly.

"Risking yourself *is* risking us, dumbass!" Dani said.

"I am not *gai'shain* to you." Aviendha bared her teeth. "You will never choose what risks I take, Rand al'Thor. Never. Know it now."

He could ... What? Wrap them in *saidin* and leave them? Wrestle them away from the gateway when the time came? A fine mess, all because they wanted to be stubborn.

"You have thought of guards," Moiraine said, "but what if who is with Rahvin is Semirhage, or Graendal? Or Lanfear? The Accepted, linked, might overwhelm one such, but could you face her and Rahvin together alone?"

There had been something in her voice when she said Lanfear's name. Was she afraid that if Lanfear was there, he might finally join her? What would he do if she was there? What could he do? "They can come," he said through clenched teeth. "Now will you go?"

"As you command," Moiraine said, but they were in no hurry about it. Aviendha took ostentatious care in rearranging her shawl before she started for the door. Lords and ladies might dart at his word, but never them.

"You did not try to talk me out of it," he said abruptly.

He meant it for Moiraine, but Pedra spoke first, though to Aviendha, and with a smile. "Stopping a man from what he wants to do is like taking a sweet from a child. Sometimes you have to do it, but sometimes it just isn't worth the trouble." The words echoed in Rand's mind, familiar yet not. He hated them, and the woman who spoke them. But not as much as he hated seeing Aviendha nod.

"The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills," was Moiraine's reply. She stood in the doorway looking more Aes Sedai than he ever remembered her, ageless, with dark eyes that seemed ready to swallow him, slight and slender yet so regal she could have commanded a roomful of queens if she could not channel a spark. That blue stone on her forehead was catching the light again. "You will do well, Rand."

He stared at the door long after it closed behind them.

It was a scuff of boots that recalled him to Mat's presence. Mat was trying to slide toward the door, moving slowly so as not to be seen.

"I need to talk to you, Mat."

Mat grimaced. Touching the foxhead like a talisman, he spun to face Rand. "If you think I'm going to put my head on the block just because those fool women did, you can forget it now. I'm no bloody hero, and I don't want to be one. Morgase was a pretty woman—I even liked her; as much as you can like a queen—but Rahvin is Rahvin, burn you, and I—"

"Shut up and listen. You have to stop running."

“Burn me if I will! This is no game I chose, and I won’t—”

“I said, shut up!” Rand drove the foxhead against Mat’s chest with a hard finger. “I know where you got this. I was there, remember? I cut the rope you were hanging from. I don’t know exactly what got shoved into your head, but whatever it is, I need it. The clan chiefs know war, but somehow you know it, too, and maybe better. I need that! So this is what you’re going to do, you and the Band of the Red Hand ...”

* * *

“Be careful tomorrow,” Moiraine said.

Dani paused at the door to her room. Ilyena wasn’t there yet. She didn’t look forward to explaining to her what had happened. Pedra had already gone off to do the same with Mayam and Theodrin.

“Of course we’ll be careful.” Her stomach was turning backflips, but she kept her voice steady. “We know how dangerous facing one of the Forsaken will be.” By Aviendha’s expression, they might have been talking about what was for supper. But then, she was never afraid of anything. Seana hadn’t been afraid of the Forsaken either, and look what that had gotten her.

“Do you, now,” Moiraine murmured. “Be very careful anyway, whether you think one of the Forsaken is near or not. Rand will need both of you in the days to come. You handle his temper well—though I may say your methods are unusual. He will need people who cannot be driven away or quelled by his rages, who will tell him what he must hear instead of what they think he wants to.”

“You do that, Moiraine,” Dani told her.

“Of course. But he will still need you. Rest well. Tomorrow will be ... difficult for us all.” She glided away down the corridor, passing from dimness to pool of lamplight to dimness. Night was already coming to these shadowed halls, and oil was in short supply.

“Will you stay with me awhile, Aviendha?” Dani asked. “I feel more like talking than eating.”

“I must tell Amys what I have promised to do tomorrow. And I must be in Rand al’Thor’s sleeping chamber when he comes.”

“Elayne can never complain that you haven’t watched Rand closely for her. Did you really drag the Lady Berewin down the hall by her hair?”

Aviendha’s cheeks coloured faintly. “Do you think these Aes Sedai in—Salidar?—will help him?”

“I don’t know. Everything’s been thrown into the air, like some gleeman’s juggling balls, and I can’t even guess where they’ll land.” Her own life felt like one of those balls these days. And she didn’t know whether someone would catch it, or it would hit the ground with a sad little sound, and roll away into a ditch.

“Rest well. And eat well tonight. In the morning, eat nothing. It is not good to dance the spears with a full stomach.”

Dani watched her stride away before pressing her hands to her stomach. She did not think she would eat tonight or in the morning. Rahvin. And maybe Lanfear, or one of the others. Nynaeve had faced Moghedien and won. But Nynaeve was stronger than she or Aviendha. There might not be another. Rand said the Forsaken did not trust one another. She could almost wish he was wrong, or at least that he was not so certain. It was frightening when she thought she saw another man looking through his eyes, heard another man’s words come out of his mouth, or when he flinched anytime someone said Ilyena’s name. It should not be so; everyone was reborn as the Wheel turned. But everyone was not the Dragon Reborn. Moiraine would not talk of it. What would Rand do if Lanfear was there? Lanfear had loved Lews Therin Telamon, but what had the Dragon felt for her? How much of Rand was still Rand?

“You will work yourself into a tizzy this way,” she said firmly. “You’re not a child. Act like a woman.”

When a serving woman brought her supper of snapbeans and potatoes and fresh baked bread, she made herself eat. It tasted like ashes.

* * *

Mat strode through the dimly lit corridors of the palace and flung open the door of the rooms that had been set aside for the young hero of the battle against the Shaído. Not that he had spent much time there; hardly any. Servants had lit two of the stand-lamps. Hero! He was no hero! What did a hero get? An Aes Sedai patting you on the head before she sent you out like a hound to do it again. A noblewoman condescending to favour you with a kiss, or laying a flower on your grave. He stalked back and forth in his anteroom, for once not pricing the flowered Illianer carpet or the chairs and chests and tables gilded and inlaid with ivory.

The stormy meeting with Rand had gone on till the sun set, him dodging, refusing, Rand following as doggedly as Hawkwing after the rout at Cole Pass. What was he to do? If he rode out again, Talmanes and Nalesean would surely follow with as many men as they could put in the saddle, expecting him to find another battle. And he probably would; that was what really put a chill on it. Much as he hated to admit it, the Aes Sedai was right. He was drawn to battle or it to him. Nobody could have tried harder to avoid one on the other side of the Alguenya. Even Talmanes had commented on it. Until the second time his careful creeping away from one lot of Andorans took them where there was no choice but to fight another. And every time he could feel the dice rolling in his head; it was almost like a warning that a fight was just over the next hill, now.

There was always a ship, or might be, down at the docks beside the grain barges. Hard to find yourself in a battle on a ship in the middle of a river. Except the Andorans held one bank of the Alguenya for half its length or more below the city. The way his luck was running, the ship would run aground on the west bank with half the Andoran army camped there.

That left doing what Rand wanted. He could just see it.

“Good morrow, High Lord Weiramon, and all you other High Lords and Ladies. I’m a gambler, a farmboy, and I’m here to take command of your bloody army! The bloody Lord Dragon Reborn will be with us as soon as he flaming takes care of one bloody little matter!”

Snatching his black-hafted spear from the corner, he hurled it the length of the room. It struck a wall hanging—a hunting scene—and the stone wall behind with a loud clang, then dropped to the floor, leaving the hunters neatly sliced in two. Swearing, he hurried to pick it up. The two-foot sword-blade was not chipped or marred. Of course not. Aes Sedai work.

He fingered the ravens on the blade. “Will I ever be free of Aes Sedai work?”

“What was that?” Melindhra asked from the door.

He eyed her as he propped the spear against the wall, and for a change it was not spun-gold hair or clear blue eyes or a firm body that he thought of. It seemed that every Aiel went to the river sooner or later, to stare silently at so much water in one place, but Melindhra went every day, just about. “Has Kadere found ships yet?” Kadere would not be going to Tar Valon on grain barges.

“The peddler’s wagons are still there. I do not know about ... ships.” She pronounced the unfamiliar word awkwardly. “Why do you wish to know?”

“I’m going away for a while. For Rand,” he added hastily. Her face was too still. “I’d take you with me if I could, but you wouldn’t want to leave the Maidens.” A ship, or his own horse? And to where? That was the question. He could reach Tear quicker on a fast rivership than on Pips. If he was fool enough to make that choice. If he had any choice.

Melindhra’s mouth tightened briefly. To his surprise, it was not over his leaving her. “So you slip back into Rand al’Thor’s shadow. You have gained much honour of your own, among the Aiel as well as the wetlanders. Your honour, not honour reflected from the *Car’a’carn*.”

“He can keep his honour and take it to Caemlyn or the Pit of Doom for all I care. Don’t you worry. I’ll find plenty of honour. I will write you about it. From Tear.” Tear? He would never escape Rand, or Aes Sedai, if he made that choice.

“He is going to Caemlyn?”

Mat suppressed a wince. He was not supposed to say anything about that. Whatever he decided about the rest, he could do that much. “Just a name pulled from my pocket. Because of the Andorans down south, I suppose. I wouldn’t know where he’s—”

He had no warning. One instant she was just standing there, the next her foot was in his middle, driving out breath, doubling him over. Eyes bulging, he fought to keep his feet, to straighten, to think. Why? She spun like a dancer, backwards, and her other foot against the side of his head drove him staggering. Without a pause she leaped straight up, kicking out, her soft bootsole taking him hard flush in the face.

When his eyes cleared enough to see, he was on his back, halfway across the room from her. He could feel blood on his face. His head seemed stuffed with wool, and the room seemed to rock. That was when he saw her take a knife from her pouch, slim blade not much longer than her hand, gleaming in the lamplight. Winding the *shoufa* around her head in a quick motion, she raised the black veil across her face.

Groggily, he moved by instinct, without thinking. The blade came out of his sleeve, left his hand as if floating through jelly. Only then did he realize what he had done and stretch out desperately, trying to snatch it back.

The hilt bloomed between her breasts. She sagged to her knees, fell back.

Mat pushed himself up, wavering on hands and knees. He could not have stood if his life hung on it, but he crawled to her, muttering wildly. “Why? Why?”

He jerked her veil aside, and those clear blue eyes focused on him. She even smiled. He did not look at the knife-hilt. His knife-hilt. He knew where the heart was in a body. “Why, Melindhra?”

“I always liked your pretty eyes,” she breathed, so faint he had to strain to hear.

“Why?”

“Some oaths are more important than others, Mat Cauthon.” The slim-bladed knife came up swiftly, all her remaining strength behind it, the point driving the dangling foxhead against his chest. The silver medallion should not have stopped a blade, but the angle was just that much wrong, and some hidden flaw in the steel snapped the blade off right at the hilt just as he caught her hand. “You have the Great Lord’s own luck.”

“Why?” he demanded. “Burn you, why?” He knew there would be no answer. Her mouth remained open, as though she might say something more, but her eyes were already beginning to glaze.

He started to pull the veil back up, to cover her face and staring eyes, then let his hand fall. He had killed men, and Trollocs, but never a woman. Never a woman until now. Women were glad when he came into their lives. It was not boasting. Women smiled for him; even when he left them, they smiled as if they would welcome him back. That was all he ever really wanted from women; a smile, a dance, a kiss, and to be remembered fondly.

He realized his thoughts were babbling. Jerking the bladeless hilt from Melindhra’s hand—it was gold-mounted jade, inlaid with golden bees—he hurled it into the marble fireplace, hoping it shattered. He wanted to cry, to howl. *I don’t kill women! I kiss them, I don’t ...!*

He had to think clearly. Why? Not because he was leaving, surely. She had hardly reacted to that. Besides, she thought he was chasing off after honour; she had always approved of that. Something she had said tugged at him, and then came back, with a chill. The Great Lord’s own luck. He had heard it differently, many times. The Dark One’s own luck. “A Darkfriend.” A question, or certainty? He wished the thought made what he had done easier in his mind. He was going to carry her face to his grave.

Tear. He had as much as told her he was going to Tear. The dagger. Golden bees in jade. He would wager there were nine without looking. Nine golden bees on a field of green. The sign of Illian. Where Sammael ruled. Could Sammael be afraid of him? How could Sammael even know? I was only a few hours since Rand had asked Mat—told him—and he was not sure himself what he was going to do. Maybe Sammael would not take the chance? Right. One of the Forsaken, afraid of gambler, however stuffed with other men’s battle knowledge his head might be. That was ridiculous. He’d met Sammael. That compact, hard-faced man hadn’t looked afraid of anything, burn him.

It all came down to this. He could believe that Melindhra had not been a Darkfriend, that she had decided to kill him on a whim, that there was no connection between a jade hilt inlaid with golden bees and his maybe going to Tear to lead an army against Illian. He could if he was a bullgoose fool. Better to err toward caution, he always said. One of the Forsaken had noticed him. He certainly was not standing in Rand’s shadow now.

Sliding across the floor, he sat with his chin on his knees and his back against the door, staring at Melindhra’s face, trying to decide what to do. When a servant knocked with his supper, he shouted for her to go away. Food was the last thing he wanted. What was he going to do? He wished he did not feel the dice spinning in his head.

CHAPTER 21: *Moiraine*



Rand tried to calm himself. He smoked some more. He sought the void. Nothing worked. Elayne's mother was dead and he had done nothing to prevent it. His pacing threatened to wear a rut in the carpet of the anteroom. Each time a circuit brought that ugly throne into view, he considered smashing it to kindling.

It was in view when the door clicked open again. He rounded on the intruder, angry words ready to fly, but it was only Moiraine.

"Why are you back? Have you decided to try and talk me out of it, after all?" He knew he was speaking too harshly to her, but couldn't stop himself.

"The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills," she said, Aes Sedai to the core. "What would we be if we ran from our destinies?"

Cowards. He resumed his pacing. Why hadn't he told Elayne the truth? The answer whipped him in circles around that room. His circling came to an abrupt halt when he found her standing right in his path. Had she demanded or cajoled he might have gone around, but the concern on her ageless face gave him pause.

"You are in pain. I do not like to see it," said she who could speak no word that was not true. Though much smaller than him, she held him in place with a mere touch of his forearms. "I never wanted to cause you any pain, please understand that."

He didn't know what to say. That her decisions had impacted him, sometimes for the good and sometimes for the bad, was inescapable. He had resented her for it often. But now he found himself touching her ageless cheek gently. "You do what you think you must, for a cause higher than yourself. I can't fault you for that."

Small fingers closed around his hand. "Nor I you." He couldn't hold her eyes. Her brother had been married to Morgase. Not that she cared, about him or the rest of her family. Or probably Rand. But ... His thoughts raced in the circles his feet could not.

"Come with me," she said. Holding him by the hand, she glided to and past the throne, towards the bedroom door beyond. Her wavy black hair and pale blue dress bannered behind her. He felt powerless to resist. Into the lamp lit room they went. Only when they were before the darkly canopied bed did Moiraine grace him with her eyes once more. There was a weakness to them he was unused to seeing.

"What's wrong?"

She occupied her eyes, and her fingers, with the buttons of his coat. "I do not want you to be alone tonight. I want you to hold me."

He cupped her face between his hands. She was so beautiful. His anger could not stand against her beauty. "Moiraine ..."

Her lips rose to meet his in a slow and tender joining. When he released her to shed his coat, she tossed her head. Her eyes shone with what he almost thought were tears, but by the time he'd yanked his shirt over his head, her lament had proven phantom.

She did not resist when he took her by her slender shoulders and turned her around. He could have ordered her to bend over the bed that he might ravage her, and she would have obeyed as she'd sworn. He never would, though. Had she known he would not when she gave herself to him? Had she known he would be unable to stop himself from loving her?

Rand blinked his hot eyes back to a semblance of sanity, but he wasn't able to stop his hands from shaking as he undid the tiny buttons at the back of her dress. He had bared her shoulders entirely when another door clicked open behind him. Moiraine froze, but Rand frowned over his shoulder.

An open-mouthed Aviendha stood there, the bedding of her pallet held in her arms. She saw Moiraine's bare back, would know her by her dress. If she hadn't known what passed between them already, she certainly did now. He didn't care. This was one woman she wouldn't be dragging down

the hall by her hair. They all let the Aes Sedai do as she pleased. And Rand knew what it would please her to do that night.

“What are—?”

He cut her off in a hard voice. “If you are going to sleep here tonight, then do it quietly.” He wrapped his arms around Moiraine and cupped her breasts in his hands. How had they put it? “This is a sweet I have no intention of ever giving up.”

Moiraine bowed her head, but she held his hands in place rather than pulling them away.

While Aviendha rustled unseen in the background, Rand slipped Moiraine’s dress over her slim hips. He kissed her back as he knelt to remove her lacy underwear and bare her bum.

“You are so beautiful,” he said.

She caught his hands and led him around the bed. Sitting, she unbuckled his belt and freed his cock. Hard already, it sprang to attention before her blushing face. “So are you,” she whispered. That was a sweet flattery, but not so sweet as the feel of her lips closing around his manhood.

He saw Aviendha turn away and dive to her pallet as though evading arrow fire. Served her right. Moiraine was certainly serving Rand right. She hadn’t seemed very familiar with a man’s body when they’d started their affair, but she was a very smart woman and had learned quickly how to stun him with pleasure. He knew she could have brought him to climax with her mouth alone, but wanted more. He wanted all of her, and forever.

The surprise was that she wanted him, too, at least for now. Judging that she’d teased him enough, Moiraine released his cock and got under the covers while Rand was still shedding the last of his clothes. As soon as he joined her, her arms went around him. They kissed again, hungrily now, while under the covers Moiraine’s legs beckoned awkwardly for him to join with her in that most sacred of ways.

He was eager to do so. Cupping her face once more, he met her eyes as he slid into her heat. The sounds she made were as sweet as the feel of her body closing around his. They moved together, dancing a dance of life as their breaths mingled in what little space there was between them.

Rand did not have to fight the urge to go fast this time. He found himself wanting to savour every slow passage along her womanhood, to hold her in his arms as long as possible.

“Hold me. Don’t let me go,” Moiraine gasped. For the hundredth time, he wondered if she really could read his mind. For once, the thought didn’t bother him at all.

“Never,” he vowed. And let Aviendha hear him say it, too.

Moiraine’s arms locked around his back. She buried her face against his neck. The pleased moans she let out almost sounded like sobs. Her hips never stopped rocking against his, each movement calling hungrily for the life within him. He could have given it to her right then. She knew that, too.

“Don’t hold back. Don’t stop. Take me ... take us ... all the way to the end.”

He wanted to—Light but he wanted to!—but Rand clenched his jaw, and his whole lower half, in stubborn defiance. He willed himself to hold on. “You ... first ...”

Moiraine’s head fell back to the pillow. “That is how it should be,” she said, with a strange, weak smile. She didn’t give him time to wonder over it, but rolled him onto his back and straddled his waist. “Behold then. See what you have made of me. And know that I have no regrets.”

The Aes Sedai sat up. The small blue stone held in her hair shook in time with her sweet breasts as her hips rose and fell upon him. The graceful hand on which her Great Serpent ring shone rubbed wantonly at the softness of her sex. Her cheeks were flushed but there was no shame in the dark eyes in which he drowned.

“I love you,” he heard himself say.

Moiraine threw back her head and came so hard that tears trickled down her face. The instant Rand stopped resisting, he came right along with her. They clung to each other for shelter in that storm of shared pleasure. He spurted in her again and again, while her pussy hungrily drank each drop.

Rand lay sprawled on his bed, stunned by the intensity of it. He was barely aware of Moiraine sliding off him, or her lightness coming to rest against his injured side. He never had to worry about that when she was around.

“I shouldn’t ...” she whispered. “There is so much I shouldn’t have done. I know I shouldn’t say it. Or feel it. But ... I love you, too.”

That was even more stunning than the sex had been. His strong arm tightened around her slender back, holding her close to his chest, where he always wanted her to be.

CHAPTER 22: Choices



Laying down his razor, Rand wiped the last flecks of lather from his face and began doing up his shirtlaces. Early morning sunlight streamed through the square arches leading to his bedchamber balcony; the heavy winter curtains had been hung, but tied back to let in a breath of air. He would be presentable when he killed Rahvin. The thought loosed a bubble of rage, floating up out of his belly. He forced it back down. He would be presentable, and calm. Cold. No mistakes.

He had woken with the dawn, as usual. And he had woken calm. Moiraine had been in a more pensive mood and reluctant to speak. A single gracious kiss was all she'd given him before rising from his bed to dress and depart. He set that aside, too. No mistakes.

When he turned from the gilt-framed mirror, Aviendha was sitting on her rolled-up pallet against the wall, beneath a hanging portraying impossibly high gold towers. He had offered to have another bed put in the room once, but she claimed mattresses were too soft for sleeping. She was watching him intently, her shift forgotten in one hand. He had been careful about not looking around from his shaving to give her time to dress, but aside from her white stockings, she wore not a stitch.

"I would not shame you in front of other men," she said abruptly.

"Shame me? What do you mean?"

She stood in one smooth motion, surprisingly pale where the sun had not touched her, slender and hard-muscled, yet with roundnesses and softnesses that haunted his dreams. This was the first time he had allowed himself to look at her openly when she flaunted herself, but she did not seem aware of it. Those big blue-green eyes were fixed on his. "I did not ask Sulin to include Enaila or Somara or Lamelle that first day. Nor did I ask them to watch you, or to do anything if you faltered. That was only their own concern."

"You just let me think they would try to carry me off like a babe if I wavered. A fine distinction."

His wry tone flew right past her. "It made you take care when you needed to."

"I see," he said dryly. "Well, I thank you for the promise not to shame me, in any case."

She smiled. "I did not say that, Rand al'Thor. I said not in front of other men. If you require it for your own good ..." Her smile deepened for a time, but then faded completely. "I ask that you not shame me in front of other women also."

He frowned. "When did I do that?"

She sniffed. "Often. But mostly you do so in ignorance. I understand that. Last night, however ... What you did with Moiraine Sedai, right in front of me ... It felt deliberate."

Rand could have made excuses about it. Said he just didn't have the heart to turn her away. It would probably have been wiser. He was not a very wise man. "Do you remember what Pedra said earlier that night? About men and candies?" he said instead. His voice was not as cold as he wanted. Old frustrations leaked through. Old pains. "I didn't like that. It reminded me of ... of the first girl I was ever involved with, when I was younger. The girl, Egwene, she used to say things like that all the time, like it was her purpose in life to make me feel as stupid and small as possible. And as miserable. She would say such things to all the men around her, not just me. But mostly me. I hated it. Sometimes, in secret, I hated her, too. I never said that, of course, or much of anything back to her. It would have been bad manners." Aviendha listened in solemn silence, her face a blank mask.

"Our parents arranged for us to be married one day," he went on. "I know. Wetlander foolishness, but that's sometimes how it is done. But then we left home and all that came to an end. I was supposed to feel sorry about it, but I was relieved. Egwene was killed in the fighting. I'm supposed to feel sorry about that, too. And I do. She didn't deserve that. She should be off somewhere living a happy life ... Somewhere far away from me." He wondered if he looked as miserable as he felt. "I still think about her sometimes, and wonder if she would have done that, or if she'd have always been at my back with her sneers and her put-downs. Telling me how being born a man meant that I

was inherently less than her. When I imagine that last ... I'm glad she's gone. I never want to live with someone like that again."

He looked at her out of the corner of his eye. Her face was still unreadable. "Pedra reminds me of her. I didn't like that you agreed with what she said."

"I see. Or I think I do." Aviendha frowned. "I do not think you are less."

"I hope not," he said quietly. "I've never admitted that to anyone. Please don't speak of it. Many of her friends are still mine."

Aviendha nodded solemnly. "I will keep your secret, and think on what you said."

Rand supposed that was better than nothing. "Do you mean to come like that?" He gestured irritably, taking her in from head to toe.

She had never shown the slightest embarrassment at being naked in front of him—far from it—but she glanced down at herself, then at him looking at her, and her face reddened. Suddenly she was surrounded by a flurry of dark brown wool and white *algode*, flying into her clothes so quickly that he could have thought she was channelling them on. "Have you arranged everything?" came from the middle of it. "Have you spoken to the Wise Ones? Who else comes with us? How many can you take? No wetlanders, I hope. You cannot trust them. Especially not treekillers. Can you truly carry us to Caemlyn in one hour? Is it like what I did the night ...? I mean to say, how will you do it? I cannot like trusting myself to things I do not know and cannot understand."

"Everything is arranged, Aviendha." Why was she babbling? And refusing to meet his eye? He had met with Rhuarc and the other chiefs still near the city; they had not truly liked his plan, but they saw it in terms of *ji'e'toh*, and none thought he had any other choice. They discussed it quickly, agreed, and then turned the talk to other things. Nothing to do with Forsaken or Illian or battle at all. Women, hunting, whether Cairhienin brandy could compare with *oosquai*, or wetlander tabac with what was grown in the Waste. For an hour he had almost forgotten what lay ahead. He hoped that the Prophecy of Rhuidean was somehow wrong, that he would not destroy those men. The Wise Ones had come to him, a delegation of more than fifty, alerted by Aviendha herself and led by Amys and Melaine and Bair; or maybe by Sorilea. With Wise Ones often it was difficult to tell who was in charge. They had not come to talk him out of anything—*ji'e'toh* again—but to make sure he understood that his obligation to Elayne did not outweigh that to the Aiel, and they had kept him in the meeting room until they were satisfied. It was that or lift them bodily out of his way to reach the door. When they wanted to be, those women were very good at ignoring shouts. "We'll find out how many I can take when I try. Only Aiel." With luck, Meilan and Maringil and the rest would not know he was gone until after he went. If the Tower had spies in Cairhien, maybe the Forsaken did as well, and how could he trust people to keep secrets who could not see the sun rise without trying to use the fact in *Daes Dae'mar*?

Most of the Shienarans had already departed, and he had not seen fit to tell Izana what he planned when he showed up that morning with Rand's breakfast. He'd try to insist on coming along if he knew, and Rand didn't want to risk him.

By the time he had shrugged into a red coat embroidered in gold, a fine wool eminently suitable for a Royal Palace, in Caemlyn or Cairhien—the thought amused him, in a bleak sort of way—by that time, Aviendha was almost dressed. It was a wonder to him how she could scramble into her clothes so quickly and yet have nothing out of place. "A woman came last night while you were away. Before I left to get my bedding."

Light! He had forgotten Colavaere. "What did you do?"

She paused in tying the laces of her blouse, eyes trying to bore a hole in his head, but her tone was offhand. "I took her back to her own chambers, where we talked for a time. There will be no more treekiller flipskirts scratching at your tent flap, Rand al'Thor."

"The very end I aimed at, Aviendha. *Light!* Did you hurt her badly? You can't go around beating ladies. These people cause me enough trouble without you bringing more."

She sniffed loudly and went back to her laces. "Ladies! A woman is a woman, Rand al'Thor. Unless she is a Wise One," she added judiciously. "That one sits lightly this morning, but her bruises can be hidden, and with a day's rest she will be able to leave her chambers. And she knows the right of matters, now. I told her if she caused you any bother again—*any* bother—I would come talk to her once more. A much longer talk. She will do as you say, when you say it. Her example will teach others. The treekillers understand nothing else."

Rand sighed. Not a method he would or could have chosen, but it might actually work. Or it might only make Colavaere and the others more sly from now on. Aviendha might not be worried about repercussions against herself—in fact, he would be surprised if she had even considered the possibility—but a woman who was High Seat of a powerful House was not the same as a young noblewoman of lesser rank. Whatever the effect for him, Aviendha could find herself set upon in some dark hallway and given ten times what she had given Colavaere, if not worse. “Next time, let me handle matters my way. I am the *Car’a’carn*, remember.”

“You have shaving lather on your ear, Rand al’Thor.”

Muttering to himself, he snatched up the striped towel and shouted, “Come!” to a rap at the door. Asmodean entered, pale lace at the neck and cuffs of his black coat, harpcase slung on his back and a sword at his hip. It might have been winter for the coolness of his face, but his dark eyes were wary.

“What do you want, Natael?” Rand demanded. “I gave you your instructions last night.” Asmodean wet his lips and glanced once at Aviendha, who was frowning at him. “Wise instructions. I suppose I might learn something to your advantage, remaining here and watching, but the talk this morning is all of the shrieks from Lady Colavaere’s apartments last night. It is said she displeased you, though no-one seems to know quite how. That uncertainty is making everyone step lightly. I doubt anyone will breathe in the next few days without considering what you might make of it.” Aviendha’s face was a picture of insufferable self-satisfaction.

“So you want to come with me?” Rand said softly. “You want to be at my back when I face Rahvin?”

“What better place for the Lord Dragon’s bard? But better yet, say under your eye. Where I can show my loyalty. I am not strong.” Asmodean’s grimace seemed natural enough in any man making that admission, but for an instant Rand sensed *saidin* filling the other man, felt the taint that twisted Asmodean’s mouth. Just for an instant, but long enough for him to judge. If Asmodean had drawn as much as he could, he would be hard pressed to match one of the Wise Ones who could channel. “Not strong, yet perhaps I can help in some small way.”

Rand wished he could see the shield Lanfear had woven. She had said it would dissipate with time, but Asmodean did not seem able to channel any more strongly now than he had the first day he was in Rand’s hands. Perhaps she had lied, to give Asmodean false hope, to make Rand believe the man would grow strong enough to teach him more than he ever would. *It would be like her*. He was uncertain whether that was his thought or Lews Therin’s, but he was sure it was true.

The long pause made Asmodean lick his lips again. “A day or two will not matter here. You will be back by then, or dead. Let me prove my loyalty. Perhaps I can do something. A whisker more weight on your side might shift the balance.” Once more *saidin* poured into him, just for a moment. Rand felt a sensation of strain, yet it was still a feeble flow. “You know my choices. I am clinging to that tuft of grass on the cliff’s lip, praying for it to hold one more heartbeat. If you fail, I am worse than dead. I must see you win and live.” Suddenly eyeing Aviendha, he seemed to realize he might have said too much. His laugh was a hollow sound. “Else how can I compose the songs of the Lord Dragon’s glory? A bard must have something to work with.” The heat never touched Asmodean—a trick of the mind, he claimed, not the Power—but beads of sweat oozed down his forehead now.

Under his eyes, or left behind? Perhaps to run looking for a hiding place when he began wondering what was happening in Caemlyn. Asmodean would be the man he was until he died and was reborn, and perhaps even after. “Under my eyes,” Rand said quietly. “And if I even suspect that where that whisker falls might displease me ...”

“I put my trust in the Lord Dragon’s mercy,” Asmodean murmured, bowing. “With the Lord Dragon’s permission, I will wait outside.”

Rand glanced around the room as the man departed, backing away still half-bowed. His sword lay on the gilt-lined chest at the foot of the bed, Dragon-buckled sword belt wrapped around the scabbard and the Seanchan spearhead. The killing today would not be with steel, not on his part. He touched his pocket, felt the hard carved shape of the fat little man with his sword; that was the only sword he needed today. For a moment, he considered Travelling to Tear, to take back *Callandor*, or even to Rhuidean for what was hidden there. He could destroy Rahvin with either before the man knew he was there. He could destroy Caemlyn itself with either. But could he trust himself? So much power. So much of the One Power. *Saidin* hung there just out of sight. The taint seemed part of him.

Rage oozed just beneath the surface, at Rahvin, at himself. If it broke loose, and he held even *Callandor* ... What would he do? He would be invincible. With the other, he could Travel to Shayol Ghul itself, put an end to it all, end it now one way or another. One way or another. No. He was not in this alone. He could not afford anything but victory.

"The world rides on my shoulders," he murmured. Suddenly he yelped and clapped a hand to his left buttock. It felt as though a needle had stabbed him, but he did not need the goose bumps fading on his arms to tell him what had happened. "What was that for?" he growled at Aviendha.

"Just to see whether the *Lord Dragon* was still made of flesh like the rest of us mortals."

"I am," he said flatly, and seized *saidin*—all the sweetness; all the filth—just long enough to channel briefly.

Her eyes widened, but she did not flinch, only looked at him as if nothing had occurred at all. Still, as they crossed the anteroom, she rubbed furtively at her bottom when she thought he was looking the other way. It seemed she was ordinary flesh, too. *Burn me, I thought I'd taught her a few manners.*

Pulling open the door, he stepped out and stood staring. Mat was leaning on his odd spear with that broad-brimmed hat pulled low, a little apart from Asmodean, but that was not what took him aback. There were no Maidens. He should have known something was wrong when Asmodean came in unannounced. Aviendha was looking around in amazement, as if she expected to find them behind one of the tapestries.

"Melindhra tried to kill me last night," Mat said, and Rand stopped thinking about Maidens. "One minute we were talking, the next she was trying to kick my head off."

Mat told the story in short sentences. The dagger with the golden bees. His conclusions. He closed his eyes when he told how he had ended it—a simple, stark, "I killed her"—and opened them again quickly as if he saw something behind his eyelids he did not care to see.

"I'm sorry you had to do that," Rand said quietly, and Mat gave a bleak shrug.

"Better her than me. I suppose. She was a Darkfriend." He did not sound as if it made much difference.

"I will settle Sammael. Just as soon as I'm ready."

"And how many will that leave?"

"The Forsaken are not here," Aviendha snapped. "And neither are the Maidens of the Spear. Where are they? What have you done, Rand al'Thor?"

"Me? There were twenty on guard when I returned to my quarters last night, and I haven't seen one since."

"Perhaps it is because Mat ..." Asmodean began, and stopped when Mat looked at him, a tight-mouthed blend of pain and readiness to hit something.

"Do not be fools," Aviendha said in a firm voice. "*Far Dareis Mai* would not claim *toh* against Mat Cauthon for this. She tried to kill him, and he killed her. Even her near-sisters would not, if she had had any. And no-one would claim *toh* against Rand al'Thor for what another did unless he ordered it done. You have done something, Rand al'Thor, something great and dark, or they would be here."

"I've done nothing," he told her sharply. "And I don't intend to stand here discussing it. Are you dressed for the ride south, Mat?"

Mat shoved a hand into his coatpocket, fingering something. He usually kept his dice and dicecup in there. "Caemlyn. I'm tired of them sneaking up on me. I want to sneak up on one of them for a change. I just hope I get the bloody pat on the head instead of the bloody flower," he added with a grimace.

Rand did not ask him what he meant. Another *ta'veren*. Two together to twist chance perhaps.

No way to tell *how*, or even *if*, but ... "It seems like we'll be together a little longer." Mat looked more resigned than anything else.

The winding stairway down the tower was empty, and no-one emerged from the rooms they passed. Rand went quietly, and was glad that neither Merile nor Raine emerged from their quarters. Let them sleep on. With luck, Rahvin would be a bad memory before they even woke up.

Before they had gone far down the tapestry-lined corridor beyond Rand's tower, Moiraine and the Accepted met them, gliding along together as if the day held no more ahead than a walk in one of the gardens. All five of the girls, cool-eyed and calm, golden Great Serpents on their fingers, really

could have been Aes Sedai, while Moiraine ... Gold threads caught the light, faintly streaking Moiraine's gown of shimmering blue silk. The small blue stone on her forehead, hanging from its gold chain fastened in her waves of dark hair, shone as brightly as the large gold-set sapphires around her neck. Hardly suitable garb for what they intended, yet in his red coat, Rand could not comment.

Perhaps it was being here, where House Damodred had once held the Sun Throne, but Moiraine's graceful carriage was more regal than he remembered ever seeing it. Not even the presence of "Jasin Natael" could spoil that queenly serenity with surprise, but amazingly, she gave Mat a warm smile. "So you are going, too, Mat. Learn to trust the Pattern. Do not waste your life attempting to change what cannot be changed." From Mat's face, he might have been considering changing his mind about being there at all, but the Aes Sedai turned from him without a trace of worry. "These are for you, Rand."

"More letters?" he said. One bore his name in an elegant hand that he recognized immediately. "From you, Moiraine?" The other carried Thom Merrilin's name. Both had been sealed with blue wax, apparently with her Great Serpent ring, impressed with the image of the snake biting its own tail. "Why write me a letter? And sealed. You've never been afraid to say whatever you wanted to say to my face. If I ever forgot it, Aviendha has been reminding me that I'm only flesh and blood."

"You have changed from the boy I first saw outside the Winespring Inn." Her voice was a soft silver chiming. "You are hardly the same at all. I pray you have changed enough."

Pedra was frowning at the letters as if she, too, wondered what was in them. So was Aviendha.

Moiraine went on more brightly, even briskly. "Seals ensure privacy. That contains things I wish you to think on; not now; when you have time for thinking. As for Thom's letter, I know no safer hands than yours in which to place it. Give it to him when you see him again. Now, there is something you must see at the docks."

"The docks?" Rand said. "Moiraine, this morning of all mornings, I've no time for—"

But she was already moving down the corridor as if sure he would follow. "I have had horses readied. Even one for you, Mat, just in case." Dani hesitated only a moment, then followed, with the other Accepted drifting after her.

Rand opened his mouth to call Moiraine back. She had sworn to obey. Whatever she had to show him, he could see it another day.

"Reminds me of Joline. So sure she can get her way," Mat muttered.

And Rand called out. "Moiraine. Come back. Whatever it is can wait for another day."

She stopped and turned, her face a marble mask, to stare at him for a long moment. "It cannot. This is important, Rand. Trust me."

He hesitated. "I'll be the judge of that. What is so important?"

She hesitated, too, until her dark eyes flicked to Mat for a moment. "You recall the redstone doorframe I brought from Rhuidean? The one you asked to use. I have changed my mind about allowing it. Perhaps it can help you now."

Mat cursed loudly. "You can't be bloody serious! I warned you about that lot, Rand!"

He had, but Rand's mind was racing with possibilities. Dangers, too. But possibilities. He'd almost given up on that *ter'angreal* doorway to the strange world of the Aelfinn and the Eelfinn. What had changed her mind? And why now?

"It would not be amiss for you to be seen this morning," Asmodean said. "Rahvin might just know of it as soon as it happens. If he has any suspicions—if he has any spies who may have listened at keyholes—it might allay them for today."

Rand looked at Aviendha. "Do you also counsel delay?"

"I counsel that you listen to Moiraine Sedai. Only fools ignore Aes Sedai."

Rand shook his head. There was a saying in the Theren, not that anybody said it where women could hear. "The Creator made women to please the eye and trouble the mind". Aes Sedai were certainly no different in one respect. "Very well."

CHAPTER 23: *The Perils of Sindhof*



They talked as their horse hooves clattered against the paving of the rigidly straight streets of Cairhien. Rand did more talking and less listening than he'd like. Getting a word out of Mat was like drawing water from a stone at times.

"They never answer!" Mat complained, infuriatingly. "They bloody think themselves funny, too. And the smell of the place! They probably don't even bathe once a fortnight."

Rand made himself bite his tongue. "So they are cruel, and tricky. But there's a treaty in place, right? What are the terms?"

"I don't know! They said I should have set a price and terms first, that I was wise to ask leavetaking since I didn't."

"Probably the first person to ever describe *you* as wise," Ilyena said.

Rand glared back at her, following along on horseback with the rest of the Accepted, within his cordon of Aielmen. Asmodean rode at his other side, while Aviendha sat behind Rand's saddle. Up ahead with Lan, Moiraine led them with very sudden haste towards what she'd always denied him before.

"No interruptions," he growled. He thought it through. "That implies that leavetaking is part of the treaty. It was three gifts instead of three answers, right?"

Mat scowled, one hand wrapping around the foxhead medallion as if to protect it from Rand. Or maybe he wanted assurance that it was still there and doing what it did. He didn't trust Rand an inch. The black-hafted spear they'd given him was thrust through a harness on Pips' saddle. What could Rand ask for? Were there limits to what they could give?

"Are they like the other ones? The rules they had, do they still apply?" Three questions the snake-like folk—Eelfinn? Aelfinn? It didn't matter—three questions they had answered, but the books Rand had read beforehand had warned that frivolous questions or questions about the Shadow would be punished. He wasn't sure what the punishment was, or how they'd enforce it, but they and their world had been strange enough that he didn't fancy his chances of resisting, channeler or not.

"How should I know!?" Mat said, sawing at his scarf in annoyance.

Rand took a deep breath, seeking calm. "Because you're the only one who's been there. Did anything you asked concern the Shadow?"

"No!" Mat snapped.

"This is a comedic farce. Neither of you are fit to be outside without your mothers," Pedra said. All Rand's glare did was make her press her thin lips together.

"You do not sound very well prepared for this, I must admit," said Theodrin. "Given the dangers Moiraine attributed to that place, I think it would be very foolish to go there." That annoyed him more, since unlike Pedra he actually liked Theodrin and thought she had a good head on her shoulders. Usually. Sometimes. Not today.

"What dangers?" Aviendha asked. She was threatening to unhorse them both in her effort to see his face.

"It'll be fine," Rand said absently. He ignored the continued complaints. Three gifts. Of what kind? Mat had come out the other side with a spear, a *ter'angreal* and a newfound knowledge of stuff, mainly the Old Tongue and warfare so far as Rand could tell. Nothing had been done on this world. They probably couldn't affect it. He supposed wishing away the Seanchan would have been too easy. Could they change things about him? Being able to channel *saidar* instead of *saidin* would solve a lot of his problems. "You said they were tricky. In what way?"

"They mince words like an Aes Sedai," Mat said, ignoring the Accepted's complaints as easily as Rand did. "Always looking for ways to catch an honest man out."

Rand grunted. He was getting used to watching what he said, and to listening for hidden meanings or traps of that kind. He couldn't claim to be great at it, though. He pestered Mat for answers

all the way to the docks but didn't feel any more confident of his decision. It didn't help that Mat himself was the most vocally against it.

"It's not bloody worth it, Rand. As well put the noose around your flaming neck yourself," he said as the wagons came into view.

Rand swung his leg over Jeade'ën's head and hopped from the saddle. "I do not like what I have heard," Aviendha said, and he took the fact that she allowed him to take her by the hips and lift her down as proof of that.

"I've been through one of those doorways before. I survived, and learned some things." He didn't tell her how dubious he was of the value of the answers he'd gotten. A bunch of riddles so obfuscated that he wasn't even sure they were riddles rather than the philosophical ramblings of a bunch of alien lunatics. "I can do it again."

"I will come with you."

Her eyes were fearlessly beautiful. He shook his head. "That's not an option." He hurried on before she could object. "The doorway in Tear took three of us through, but we all ended up alone on the other side."

"I do not like this at all," she growled.

He wasn't sure he liked it himself. "What is it you wanted me to see, Moiraine?" he said impatiently, tying Jeade'ën's reins to one wheel of the last wagon in line.

She was standing on tiptoe to peer over the side of the wagon bed at a pair of casks that seemed familiar. Unless he was mistaken, they held the two *cuendillar* seals, packed in wool for protection now that they were no longer unbreakable. He felt the Dark One's taint strongly here; it almost seemed to come from the casks, a faint miasma as from something rotting in a hidden place.

"It will be safe here," Moiraine murmured. Lifting her skirts gracefully, she started up the line of wagons. Lan heeled her, a half-tame wolf, the cloak hanging down his back all disturbing ripples of colour and nothingness.

Rand glared. "Did she tell you what it was, Dani?"

"Just that you had to see something. That you had to come here, anyway."

"You must trust Aes Sedai," Aviendha said, almost as levelly, but with a hint of doubt. Mat snorted.

The oddly-twisted redstone doorframe stood on an open wagon bed, a relatively empty one considering how much Moiraine had taken from the cache in Rhuidean. She walked past it, looking about for who knew what, but Rand stopped at that wagon.

"I'm going to try it," he told her back.

She stopped and turned, her face expressionless. "The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills."

Rand climbed onto the wagon bed. There were a few other relics in sight, including an ugly bracelet lying loose near the doorframe, but his attention was all on the gate and the world beyond it. Sindhol, they had called it in the Age of Legends. Nothing he had read mentioned the natives' name for their world.

A wise man would jump back down. A fool would risk it all, risk the world itself, on the chance that the strange folk on the other side of that door could make things easier—*would* make things easier. Neither was remotely certain. Mat said they enjoyed what they had done to him. Giving them the chance to do the same, or worse, to Rand would be madness.

Yet he wanted to do it. The tasks before him were so huge. He needed every advantage he could get. If it was just him at risk, he'd probably have stepped through already, but his life wasn't only his own anymore. If he died before his prophesised time, he would be handing the Dark One victory, and the people that he cared about would suffer for that. It was a gamble, and he hated to gamble. That was Mat's game, though even he had almost lost all by gambling here. Rand preferred to plan ahead—to stack the deck, as it were—but his efforts to plan for what might await him on the other side of that door had been stymied by ignorance.

"It's a bad idea, Rand," Mat called.

"I know," he whispered. He risked one look back, and saw the worry in Aviendha's eyes just before light and sound exploded around him, drowning out all else, erasing the world ... and bringing him to a new one.

Rand suddenly found himself alone in a star-shaped chamber. Thick, black stone columns surrounded the open area in the centre of the chamber in which he stood. Behind him was an exact

copy of the redstone doorframe he had just stepped through. Or perhaps it was the same one, somehow managing to be both in his world and in this one. He didn't know. There was too much he didn't know. He seized *saidin* immediately.

A rough voice sounded from among the columns. Rand spun around to behold a man whose colouring mirrored his own, but no-one who saw them could ever have thought them related. The speaker was tall and thin, with too-large eyes and too-long ears. He wore a short black skirt and his chest was covered only by a series of studded straps.

The man—if man he could be called—stood with an air of expectation, but Rand didn't know what he'd said. The creatures that lived in this world had made contact with humanity during the Age of Legends, and learned the Old Tongue from the people back then. The Common Tongue was new to them and even their emissaries didn't speak it well, as he'd learned when last he'd visited this place.

"I do not understand you. If we are to bargain, you will need to find someone who can speak the Common Tongue," he said.

It was hard to read that strange face, but he thought the man looked confused. He said something else in the Old Tongue, the words only barely recognisable to Rand despite his recent studies. When no response was forthcoming, the fox-like being stepped backwards among the columns. He disappeared behind one and never returned. Striding over and looking around revealed only empty space. Refusing to be unnerved, Rand folded his hands behind his back and waited. This was just as Mat had described. Things appearing in places they had no business being, and disappearing the same way. And those straps ... Leather, but not made from the skins of animals. His traitorous eyes were drawn to the empty doorframe but his feet remained planted firmly on the black stone floor.

The man did not return, really, any more than he had left. One moment Rand was alone, the next a pair of strange beings in dark skirts were standing beside him. They looked so like the first that they might have been twins. Or triplets, for these two spoke in a language he could understand.

"The new, and the old," said one, leaning towards Rand and inhaling deeply, as if he'd caught a whiff of Mistress al'Vere's good pies.

The other smiled hungrily. "Abide you by the treaty? No iron, instruments of music, or things to make fire with do you carry?"

They spoke the Common Tongue with difficulty, but that wasn't what made Rand slow to respond. He would have to measure every word carefully here if he was to avoid Mat's fate. "I carry no such things with me." That was not to say that he was without the means to make fire, however, as he would be happy to show them should they come at him with their bronze knives and sharp teeth. *Saidin* raged within him, but deep in the void he scarcely noticed it.

"What do you want?"

Careful now. The thought floated outside the void. He was coldly calm. "You are not the ones that bargain."

"No. We take you to them," said one of the twins.

He led the way through a five-sided doorway, while the other followed on Rand's heels. He didn't like having him there, but when he frowned back the man only grinned toothily. Despite Mat's warnings, and the void that sheltered him, he was still surprised to see that the redstone doorway and the chamber that held it were gone. There was only bare black stone where the doorway had been. If it went wrong, how was he to get back home? He might be able to scare them off with the sword of fire, as he had before, but what would that win him? The chance to wander these corridors until he died of thirst?

Theirs was a silent procession, through a strangely shifting palace of black stone lit by glowing yellow crystals. They passed many of those five-sided doorways on the way, before his escorts abruptly stopped at one. Inside was an oddly angular chamber with an eight-pointed star marked on the floor in more of that crystalline substance. At each point of the star was placed a six feet tall pillar, and on each of those pillars stood a creature akin to those who'd brought him there. Four were men, four were women. All wore long white skirts, though the women had on matching white blouses rather than the studded leather strips that the men favoured. Man or woman, their pale eyes fixed on Rand as soon as he stepped inside.

It was one of the women who spoke, her voice as rough as that of the man who had greeted him. Rand studied her for a moment, wondering. They weren't ugly exactly, these beings, but they

were so very ... alien. He could find no trace of arousal within himself, despite his predilections. For all he knew her kiss might drain a man's soul, just as a draghkar's would.

His escorts flanked him. It was one of them who translated the woman's words. "She says to speak. The treaty holds here, where agreements are made. What is your need? Speak."

"We should first agree on a price," Rand said.

They exchanged knowing looks, the people on the pillars, and sharp smiles. Rand's look was knowing, too. *You'll cheat me if you can, and think nothing wrong with it.* Not all that was evil was born of the Shadow. It was a skirted man who spoke this time.

"What do you offer in exchange for our gifts," his escort translated.

It was worth a shot. "I have an important job to do. One that impacts on a lot of lives, perhaps even yours," he said, while the man at his side growled in the Old Tongue. "It would be wise of you to assist me."

Their harsh laughter needed no translating. It rolled across the void and left no echo.

"Very well. Then here first are my terms. When our bargain is agreed, I must be returned alive, with no injuries I did not agree to, at the place in my world I left from, no more than an hour after I left. Do you agree?" He waited for their assents before pressing on. "As to the price, first tell me what it is you want."

According to Mat they wanted you to set a price before asking for the gifts. That seemed the wrong way around to Rand. If he could get them to agree to something simple, then ask for something priceless, then he would walk away from this meeting a very happy man. But could he? They were as tricky with their words as an Aes Sedai, and much crueller.

The eight growled words in the Old Tongue. Some few he recognised before his escorts translated.

"*Mirhage.*" Pain.

"*Daghain.*" Fear.

"*Fadan.*" Sadness.

One woman spoke last, and longer than the others. "You have felt so much, but it is hidden from us. Recall it. Kill them again. Break it all."

"No!" he snapped. They swayed drunkenly upon their pillars. "But I can give you pain. My pain. I have endured enough of it. Do you want to know what it is like to cause the deaths of thousands? Or is it skin you want?" His stomach roiled at the sight of their leather harnesses. Moiraine and the Accepted were waiting on the other side. He could endure.

Only when his translator finished did the leaders smile. They liked that last suggestion best. Rand refused to shiver. "You'd take the skin off my back if you could, huh? Fitting. But only the back." He could endure that much. He had to.

They growled as one. "*O'vin.*"

"It is agreed," said the translator. A man spoke down from his pillar. When he was done the translator spoke again. "By the ancient treaty, here is agreement made. What is your need? Speak."

His need. His needs were too many to list. Which of those needs could he possibly get these people to help with, was more the question. Nothing frivolous was an easy restriction. Nothing touching the Shadow was much harder.

I need to save the world from the Shadow, he might have asked. There was a nice, easy wish. Whatever strange abilities they had, however, he doubted they could do something so huge. And just asking might cause them to turn on him. *Saidin* still raged within Rand as, wrapped in the void, he coldly considered his options.

Could they shield him from the taint? He knew it was possible. Asmodean had been protected so, before Rand ripped it from him. The same protection had been offered to him by Ba'alzamon if he turned to the Shadow, and been rightly scorned. If he asked for that, what would they give him? Tricky. Prone to playing games with words. Could they, would they, link him to the Dark One as Asmodean had been? A horrible prospect, but these were a horrible people.

There was something less dangerous, though. A great concern that was not directly tied to the Shadow. He chose his words with care. "I wish to avoid Breaking the World again without having to kill myself."

A woman spoke and his translator echoed. "Done."

Let him channel *Saidar*? Madness. They could never do that. Just asking would likely result in one of the cruel tricks Mat had cautioned against. Two more chances.

One option, unconnected to the Shadow, could help both him and others. “I am tired of being judged for my sex. I wish for a way to free mankind from the matriarchy’s dominion,” he said.

“Done.”

Last chance. Did the Forsaken count as part of the Shadow? What could these people do to get the Aes Sedai off his back? Could they give him more time, more wit; make people like or trust him, allow him to keep his loved ones happy? Perhaps make the Seanchan Empire stay away? What should he ask? There was so much he needed, and yet he struggled to think of what he could wish for that would not blow up in his face.

Above all, he wanted to be able to protect his loved ones, even from himself. Could they help with that? He would harm no-one if he was dead, of course; an “aid” it might well amuse them to give. What other ways could they help him there? He was already a powerful channeler. It wasn’t lack of strength that put them all at risk. Though ... It might not be much, but it meant he would never have to sit helplessly and watch one of them die.

Was it a waste? There had to be something bigger he could get. He pictured Merile writhing in pain, bleeding out. The girl who had Healed him so often, dying because he could not return the favour. *Burn that*. “I wish I had the Talent to Heal with the One Power. And strongly!”

Again one of the men on the pillars growled. Again came the translation. “Done.”

“Done,” Rand echoed. Yet nothing had changed. “Now what?”

The four men and four women looked between each other, spoke words he did not understand. And they laughed. One woman hid her inhuman teeth behind her hand in a disturbingly human way. “*Nar*,” she giggled, looking right at him. That was another of the words he knew. It meant “fool”.

He felt his face heat, even in the void. He’d messed it up somehow, said something wrong. Burn it all. There was nothing to be done now, though. He’d tossed the damn dice, and now it was time to pay up.

Rand took off his coat. Keeping a tight hold on it and the precious *angreal* in its pocket, he freed one arm at a time, then pulled off his shirt, baring his chest. And his back. He draped the garments over one tattooed arm and faced that vulpine folk defiantly.

“Well? Be quick about it. I’m a busy man, and your hour’s nearly up.”

They did not climb down from the pillars. They were simply in front of him one moment and behind him the next. He was not able to hide his start. Those bronze knives were in their hands, and their faces were sharp with hunger. *Saidin* raged.

Rand did not. Against the nearest pillar he leaned, coat gripped tight. Even the stone here felt strange to the touch, not cold the way it should be. The metal was cold, though. Until they spilled his hot blood on it. He tried not to scream, but even with the void shielding him from the worst of it, his body cried out at the pain and his throat gave voice to it.

Two gripped his arms to hold him in place, while the others crowded close, gibbering excitedly. One alone did the skinning, and she was *not* quick about it. In strips she went, starting at his waist and moving up to his neck. His legs were shaking uncontrollably by the end of the first pass, and a mad need to keep his torso still for her dominated his thoughts. If the knife slipped ... They had given their words, as had he. He knew what his was worth, for he stood there and let her slow knife slip under his skin to shave off another strip. He had only hope on which to judge theirs.

His tormentor was panting in a way that was sickly sexual. As she worked, one of her fellow foxes seized the strip of skin she’d already cut and pulled it from Rand’s body. It pulled a shriek from his lungs in the process. He’d never imagined air—air itself—could hurt so much. Their sighs of satisfaction came in time with his screams.

Sighs and screams alike had dimmed by the time she was taking her third strip of his skin. Rand had enough awareness left to know it would be the last. He could hear his own blood dripping to the floor. Away. He would soon be away. Back to Moiraine and her Healing. He just had to hold on a little longer. He stood there, and let them finish doing what he’d said they could do. He didn’t even scream when the third strip was torn from him, only flinched. His head felt very light. Everything was so bright.

The words that were spoken when one of them touched his sweat-sodden hair were translated, but Rand was beyond listening. So two those that were said as a rose gold medallion was being draped

over his neck. The black cloth gag was utterly unnecessary, but the manacles that fastened around his wrists and the equally bronze chain attached stirred a relic of sanity.

The leaders would not have understood his mumbled objections even without the gag, but the twins who had brought him there spoke with haste.

“Back. To the greeting chamber we go. Back, never to return,” one said.

When he walked away, Rand stumbled after him with haste. His legs were still shaking. His back was one big scream. He almost fell several times as he followed his guide back through the twisted, angular hallways. The redstone doorframe looked like salvation itself. Ignoring his guide, saying no goodbyes, Rand forced his faltering steps towards it and lurched right on through.

CHAPTER 24: *Fading Words*



It was with a roar of sound and a flash of blinding light that Rand returned to Cairhien. To him, at least. Those he had left behind looked oddly indifferent, standing much where he'd left them. It didn't look like much time had passed. They gaped open-mouthed when they saw him; some called questions, others slumped in relief. He tried to speak, then realised the cause of their gaping.

Clawing off the gag with his manacled hands, he staggered to the edge of the wagon bed and dropped his coat to the ground. The prospect of jumping down was a nightmare. The air here was no less cruel than that in the other world. It felt like thousands of needles were pressing into his tortured back. Every motion hurt, but he had to get down.

"That was a brief visit," Ilyena said. She gave a short laugh. "Did they get tired of you that—Light's mercy! Your back!"

It wasn't that far down, but even going to one knee had strained his endurance.

Mat's was much less inhibited. With a shouted oath, he vaulted onto the wagon bed and grabbed Rand by the shoulders, careful not to touch the exposed, bloody mess of his back. Aviendha was shouting for Moiraine, while Theodrin pressed both hands to her cheeks and Mayam doubled over, retching. Even Pedra looked shaken.

Ilyena was right behind Mat, aided by the cupped hands quick-thinking Dani used to boost her onto the wagon bed. Moiraine was coming at a run, and the Aiel were crowding closer, but all Rand cared about was Ilyena. She had the Talent for Healing. Hopefully, so did he, now. Hopefully she could Heal him before he bled to death.

Frowning intently, the Volsuni in the yellow dress slapped her hands to Rand's face. She and Mat between them were able to hold him still as the icy shock of a Healing surged through him. He could feel the flesh on his back knitting together and new skin replacing that which he'd lost. It almost felt like being flayed all over again, only in reverse.

Mat, kneeling a bit behind, made a retching sound of his own. "Burn me, that's so gross."

Yet, when the Healing had run its course, a wonderful relief settled over Rand. He was hungry and tired, but the absence of that pain was a true blessing. His forehead came to rest against Ilyena's. For once, even Lews Therin was silent. "Thank you," he sighed.

"What happened in there?" she asked, still shocked.

"What we agreed on," Rand explained. He managed to get off the wagon, though his legs still felt shaky and his breeches were sodden with his own blood. He had to lean against it to prevent himself from falling.

"You agreed to ... to ..." Dani couldn't finish it. If she'd been any less worried, he was sure she would have smacked him.

"And kept your word," Aviendha said quietly. While Mat and the Accepted were in various states of horrified disgust, she wore an expression of fierce pride. He had no idea what the other Aiel made of it, and didn't recognise many of them, but one-eyed Argus was nodding slowly.

"Did you at least get something in return?" Moiraine asked.

"I bloody well hope so." But he honestly wasn't sure. He certainly didn't feel any more knowledgeable than before, like Mat. He'd a medallion of his own, now, but what did it do? The manacles made it hard to examine it. "Could you get these things off me?"

It took little more than the tap of Moiraine's finger to make the bronze bands split and fall to the ground with their rattling chain. Why had they put him in those, and the gag? Were they special? Was he supposed to keep them? Fool, the fox-like woman had called him. He felt like one.

"You are lucky an ... Aes Sedai was near, shepherd," Lan said, letting the cool look Ilyena gave him as she was climbing down from the wagon wash off him. "Without their Healing, a wound like that would have crippled you for life."

"It was a calculated risk," he said. Lan nodded.

“Bloody madness, is what it was,” Mat said disgustedly from where he sat on the wagon bed. “They are a nasty, treacherous bunch of goatbotherers. Didn’t I tell you so? Did you listen? Of course not! No-one listens to Mat Cauthon. They just march right off and expect him to come pull their bacon out of the pan!” He blanched suddenly. “Uh ... I’m sure they, ah, had other uses for it. I-I don’t think they’d ...”

Rand’s stomach threatened to rebel. He leant back and tried to focus on the fluffy clouds in the blue morning sky. “Please stop talking, Mat.”

He didn’t, just hopped down from the wagon and went right on ranting. “I want as far away from that thing as I can get. And from any other Aes Sedai work! Blood and ashes. Every bloody time. And you can bloody stop glaring at me, Ilyena! I was right, wasn’t I?” He stalked on up the line of wagons, shaking his head and proclaiming his rightness to anyone and no-one.

“I hate to admit it, but he might have a point. A slight one,” Theodrin said. “I feel a sudden urge to be far away from that thing.” To look at, it was a mere doorframe. It didn’t even have a door in it. But she wasn’t the only one to shiver when she looked at it.

“It would be for the best,” Moiraine said, calm as a winter pond.

While the Accepted walked off after Mat, she remained. Rand did, too, examining his new medallion while Aviendha hovered near with his coat in hand. The chain was a pale rose-gold metal, like the strange symbol attached: two circles interlinked, one with an arrow attached and the other with a cross. It meant nothing to him.

He accepted and pulled on his shirt, moving carefully and glad to feel no twinges in his back. Moiraine had noted the medallion, but she did not ask after it. That was not like her. He shrugged into his coat, wondering. By the time he’d recovered the gag and manacles, she was already strolling off in the opposite direction from the Accepted. He’d ask later, he decided. First, he needed to store the Eelfinn’s “gifts” in Jeade’en’s saddlebags.

* * *

The sun was not yet high enough to lift the city wall’s long shadow from the stone quay where Hadnan Kadere’s wagons were lined up, but he still mopped his face with a large handkerchief. It was only partly the heat that made him sweat. Great grey curtain walls stretching into the river at either end of the row of docks made the quay seem a dim box, with him caught in it. There were nothing but broad, round-bowed grain barges docked here, and the same anchored in the river waiting their turn to unload. He had considered slipping onto one when it cast off, but it meant abandoning most of what he still possessed. Yet had he thought the slow passage downriver would take him anywhere except to his death, he would have. Lanfear had not returned to his dreams, but he had the burns on his chest to remind him of her commands. Just the thought of disobeying one of the Chosen made him shiver, even with sweat rolling down his face.

If only he knew who to trust; to the extent it was possible to trust any of his fellow Darkfriends. The last of his drivers who had sworn the oaths had vanished two days ago, very likely on one of the grain barges. He still did not know which Aiel woman had slipped that note under his wagon door—“You are not alone among strangers. A way has been chosen”—though he had several possibilities in mind. The docks held almost as many Aiel as they did workmen, come to stare at the river; he had seen a few of those faces more often than seemed reasonable, and some had looked at him consideringly. A few Cairhienin had as well, and a Tairen lord. That meant nothing by itself, of course, but if he could find a few men to work with ...

A mounted party had appeared in one of the gateways earlier, Moiraine and Rand al’Thor leading the way with the Aes Sedai’s Warder as they threaded through the carts hauling grainsacks away. A wave of cheers had ridden with them.

“All glory to the Lord Dragon!” and “Hail the Lord Dragon!” and now and again “Glory to Lord Matrim! Glory to the Red Hand!”

For once the Aes Sedai had turned down toward the tail end of the line of wagons without so much as a glance at Hadnan. He was just as glad. Even if she had not been Aes Sedai, even if she had not looked at him as if she knew every black corner of his mind, he would as soon not have looked too closely at some of the things she had filled his wagons with. Yesterday evening she had made him strip the canvas off that oddly twisted redstone doorframe in the wagon just behind his. She seemed to

take a perverse delight in making him help her himself with whatever she wanted to study. He would have covered the thing up again if he could bear to go near it, or could make any of his drivers do so. None with him now had seen Herid fall half through it in Rhuidean and half disappear—Herid had been the first to run away once they cleared the Jangai; the man had not been entirely right in the head after the Warder hauled him back—but they could look at it, see the way the corners did not meet properly, how you could not follow it around with your eyes without blinking and growing dizzy.

Al'Thor and the others were here still, which was enough to add to his sweating. Mat Cauthon was with him, he noticed sourly. The man was wearing *his* hat; he had never been able to find a replacement. The Aiel wench, Aviendha, was sticking as close to al'Thor as his shirt. If he needed any confirmation that the Aiel woman was bedding al'Thor, he only had to see the way she looked at him; a woman who had taken a man to her bed always looked at him with that light of ownership in her eyes after. More importantly, Natael was with them. This was the first time Hadnan had been this close to him since crossing the Spine of the World. Natael, who stood high in the Darkfriends. If he could get past the Maidens to reach Natael ...

Suddenly Hadnan blinked. Where were the Maidens? Al'Thor always had an escort of spear-wielding women. Frowning, he realized he could not see a single Maiden among the Aiel on the quay or the docks.

“Aren’t you going to look at an old friend, Hadnan?”

That melodious voice jerked Hadnan around, gaping at a hatchet-nosed face, dark eyes almost hidden by rolls of fat. “Keille?” It was impossible. No-one survived alone in the Waste except Aiel. She *had* to be dead. But there she stood, white silk straining over her bulk, ivory combs standing tall in her dark curls.

A faint smile on her lips, she turned with a grace that still surprised him in a woman so large and lightly climbed the steps into his wagon.

For a moment he hesitated, then hurried after her. He would as soon Keille Shaogi really had died in the Waste—the woman was bossy and obnoxious; she need not think she was getting a penny of the little he had managed to salvage—but she stood as high as Jasin Natael. Perhaps she would answer a few questions. At the least, he would have someone to work with. At the worst, someone to put blame on. Power went with standing high, but so did blame for the failures of those beneath you. More than once he had fed his superiors to those still higher up in order to cover himself.

Carefully closing the door, he turned—and would have screamed if his throat had not clenched too tight for sound.

The woman who stood there wore white silk, but she was not fat. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, eyes like dark, bottomless mountain pools, woven silver belting her narrow waist, silver crescents in her shimmering black hair. Hadnan knew that face from his dreams.

His knees thudding to the floor shook breath loose. “Great Mistress,” he said hoarsely, “how may I serve?”

Lanfear might have been looking at an insect, one she might crush beneath her slipper or might not. “By showing your obedience to my commands. I have been too busy to watch Rand al'Thor myself. Tell me what he has done, aside from conquering Cairhien, what he plans to do.”

“It is difficult, Great Mistress. One such as myself cannot come close to such as he.” An insect those cool eyes said, allowed to live so long as it was useful. Hadnan racked his brain for everything he had seen or heard or imagined. “He is sending Aiel south in huge numbers, Great Mistress, though I do not know why. The Tairens and Cairhienin do not seem to notice, but I don’t think they can tell one Aiel from another.” Neither could he. He would not dare lie to her, but if she thought he had more use than he did ... “He has founded a school of some sort, in a city palace that belonged to a House with no survivors ...” At first there was no way to tell whether she liked what she was hearing, but as he went on, her face began to darken.

* * *

The items safely stored, Rand drained the contents of his waterskin in a way that had Aviendha fussing over the amount of blood he’d been losing lately. He allowed that she might have a point this time. He needed to be at his best when he faced Rahvin. Half played was not that. But he’d just have to make do.

“Natael, go tell Bael I’ll be with him in—”

At the other end of the line, the side of Kadere's wagon exploded, splinters scything down Aiel and townsfolk. Rand knew; he did not need goose bumps prickling his skin to know. He raced toward the wagon, after Moiraine and Lan. Time seemed to slow, everything happening at once, as if the air were jelly clinging to each moment.

Lanfear stepped out into stunned silence except for the moans and screams of the injured, something limp and pale and red-streaked hanging from her hand, dragging behind her as she walked down invisible steps. Her face was a mask carved of ice. "He told me, Lews Therin," she almost screamed, flinging the pale thing into the air. Something caught it, inflated it for a moment into a bloody, transparent statue of Hadnan Kadere; his skin, removed whole. It was far too easy for Rand to imagine her doing that now. To Kadere, or to him. The figure collapsed and fell as Lanfear's voice rose to a screech. "You mean to marry another woman instead of me! Again!"

Moments clinging, all happening at once.

Before Lanfear reached the stones of the quay, Moiraine lifted her skirts higher and began running straight toward her. Quick as she was, Lan was quicker, ignoring her shout of, "No, Lan!" Sword coming out, long legs carried him ahead of her, colour-shifting cloak waving behind as he charged. Suddenly he seemed to run into an invisible stone wall, bounce back, try to stagger forward again. One step, and as if a giant hand had smashed him aside, he flew ten paces through the air, crashing to the stones.

While he was in midair, Moiraine jerked forward, feet skidding along the pavement, until she was face to face with Lanfear. It was only for a moment. The Forsaken looked at her as though wondering what could have gotten in her way, then Moiraine was flung to one side so hard she rolled over and over until she disappeared beneath one of the wagons.

The quayside was in turmoil. Just moments since Kadere's wagon erupted, yet only the blind could not know the One Power was being wielded by the woman in white. Along the docks axes flashed, cutting ropes, freeing barges as their crews desperately fended the craft toward open water and flight. Bare-chested dockmen and dark-clothed townsfolk struggled to jump aboard. In the other direction men and women milled and screamed as they fought to pass through the gates into the city. And among them, *cadin'sor*-clad figures veiled themselves and rushed at Lanfear with spears or knives or bare hands. There could be no doubt she was the source of the attack, no doubt she fought with the Power. They ran to dance the spears regardless.

Fire rolled over them in waves. Arrows of it pierced those who came on with their clothes in flames. It was not as if Lanfear battled them, or even paid them any real mind. She might have been brushing aside gnats or bitemes. Those who fled burned as well as those who tried to fight. She moved toward Rand as if nothing else existed.

Heartbeats only.

Three steps she had taken when Rand seized the male half of the True Source, molten steel and steel-shattering ice, sweet honey and midden heap. Deep in the void, the fight for survival was distant, the battle before him scarcely less. As Moiraine vanished beneath the wagon, he channelled, pulling the heat from Lanfear's fires, sinking it into the river. Flames that a moment before engulfed human forms, vanished. In the same instant he wove the flows again, and a misty grey dome came into being, a long oval enclosing him and Lanfear and most of the wagons, an almost transparent wall that shut out all not already within. Even as he tied the weave, he was not sure what it was or where it had come from—some memory of Lews Therin's perhaps—but Lanfear's fires struck it and stopped. He could see people outside dimly, too many thrashing and flailing—he had taken the flames, not the searing of flesh; that stench still hung in the air—but none would burn now that had not already. Bodies lay inside, too, mounds of charred cloth, some stirring feebly, moaning. She did not care; her channelled flames winked out; the gnats were dispelled; she never glanced aside.

Heartbeats. Argus had been among the Aiel nearest. It was hard to recognise him now, under all the burns, or Jordi, who lay not far from him. Rand had known them both. He was cold in the emptiness of the void, and if he felt sorrow for the dead and dying and scarred, the feeling was so far off it might not have been. He was cold itself. Emptiness itself. Only the rage of *saidin* filled him.

Movement to either side. Aviendha and Dani, eyes concentrated on Lanfear. He had meant to shut them out from this. They must have raced with him. Mat and Asmodean; outside with Ilyena and the rest; the wall missed the final few wagons. In icy calm he channelled Air to snare Lanfear; Dani and Aviendha could shield her while he distracted her.

Something severed his flows; they snapped back so hard that he grunted.

“One of them?” Lanfear snarled. “Which is Aviendha?” Dani threw her head back and wailed, eyes bulging, the world’s agony shrieking from her mouth. “Which is the slut who thinks to marry you?” Aviendha rose on tiptoes, shuddering, howls chasing Dani’s as they climbed higher and higher.

The thought was suddenly there in the emptiness. *Spirit woven so, with Fire and Earth. There.* Rand felt something being cut, something he could not see, and Dani collapsed in a motionless heap, Aviendha to hands and knees, head down and swaying.

Lanfear staggered, her eyes going from the women to him, dark pools of black fire. “You are mine, Lews Therin! Mine!”

“No.” Rand’s voice seemed to come to his ears down a mile-long tunnel. *Distract her from the girls.* He kept moving forward, did not look back. “I was never yours, Mierin. I will always belong to Ilyena.” The void quivered with sorrow and loss. And with desperation, as he fought something besides the scouring of *saidin*. For a moment he hung balanced. *I am Rand al’Thor.* And, *Ilyena, ever and always my heart.* Balanced on a razor edge. *I am Rand al’Thor!* Other thoughts tried to well up, a fountain of them, of Ilyena, of Mierin, of what he could do to defeat her. He forced them down, even the last. If he came down on the wrong side ... *I am Rand al’Thor!* “Your name is Lanfear, and I’ll die before I love one of the Forsaken.”

Something that might have been anguish crossed her face; then it was a marble mask once more. “If you are not mine,” she said coldly, “then you are dead.”

Agony in his chest, as if his heart was about to explode, in his head, white-hot nails driving into his brain, pain so strong that inside the void he wanted to scream. Death was there, and he knew it. Frantically—even in the void, frantic; emptiness shimmered, dwindled—he wove Spirit and Fire and Earth, flailing it wildly. His heart was no longer beating. Fingers of dark pain crushing the void. Grey veil falling over his eyes. He felt his weave slice raggedly through hers. The burn of breath in empty lungs, lurch of heart beginning to pump again. He could see again, silver and black flecks floated between him and a stone-faced Lanfear still catching her balance from the rebound of her flows. The pain was there in head and chest like wounds, but the void firmed, and bodily pain was remote.

Well that it was distant, for he had no time to recover. Forcing himself to move forward, he struck at her with Air, a club to knock her senseless. She slashed the weave, and he struck again, again, again each time that she sliced through his last weave, a furious rain of blows she somehow saw and countered, always moving closer. If he could keep her occupied for a moment more, if one of those invisible cudgels landed on her head, if he could get close enough to strike her with his fist ...

Unconscious, she would be as helpless as anyone else.

Suddenly she seemed to realize what he was doing. Still blocking his blows as easily as if she could see every one, she danced backwards until her shoulders hit the wagon behind her. And she smiled like winter’s heart. “You will die slowly, and beg me to let you love me before you die,” she said.

It was not at him directly that she struck this time. It was at his link to *saidin*.

Panic rang the void like a gong at the first knife-sharp touch, the Power diminishing as it slid deeper between him and the Source. With Spirit and Fire and Earth he cut at the knife blade; he knew where to find it; he knew where his link was, could feel that first nick. Her attempted shield vanished, reappeared, returned as fast as he could cut it, but always with that momentary ebbing of *saidin*, moments when it almost failed, leaving his counterstroke barely enough to foil her attack. Handling two weaves at once should have been easy—he could handle ten or more—but not when one was a desperate defence against something he could not know was there until it was almost too late. Not when another man’s thoughts kept trying to surface inside the void, trying to tell him how to defeat her. If he listened, it might be Lews Therin Telamon who walked away, with Rand al’Thor a voice sometimes floating in his head if that.

“I’ll make *both* of those trulls watch you beg,” Lanfear said. “But should I make them watch you die first, or you them?” When had she climbed into the open wagon bed? He had to watch her, watch for any hint that she was tiring, her concentration slipping. It was a vain hope. Standing beside the twisted doorframe *ter’angreal*, she looked down at him, a queen about to pass sentence, yet she could spare time for chill smiles at a dark ivory bracelet that she turned over and over in her fingers. “Which will hurt you most, Lews Therin? I want you to hurt. I want you to know pain such as no man has ever known!”

The thicker the flow to him from the Source, the harder it would be to cut. His hand tightened on his coat pocket, the fat little stone man with his sword hard against the heron branded into his palm. He drew on *saidin* as deeply as he could, till the taint floated in the emptiness with him like misting rain.

“Pain, Lews Therin.”

And there was pain, the world swallowed in agony. Not heart or head this time, but everywhere, every part of him, hot needles stabbing into the void. He almost thought he could hear a quenching hiss at each thrust, and each came deeper than the last. Her attempts to shield him did not slow; they came faster, stronger. He could not believe she was so strong. Clinging to the void, to searing, freezing *saidin*, he defended himself wildly. He could end it, finish her. He could call down lightning, or wrap her in the fire she herself had used to kill. At this range she would never be able to dodge the Balefire.

Images darted through the pain. A golden-haired woman lying in a ruined hallway where, it seemed, the very walls had melted and flowed. *Ilyena, forgive me!* It was a despairing cry. Mat’s bleak eyes; *I killed her.*

He could end it. Only, he could not. He was going to die, perhaps the world would die, but he could not make himself kill a woman. Somehow it seemed the richest joke the world had ever seen.

* * *

Wiping the blood from her mouth, Moiraine crawled out from beneath the tail of the wagon and rose unsteadily to her feet, the sound of a man’s laughter in her ears. In spite of herself, her eyes darted, searching for Lan, found him lying almost against the foggy grey wall of the dome that stretched overhead. He twitched, perhaps trying to find strength to rise, perhaps dying. She forced him out of her mind. He had saved her life so many times that by rights it should have belonged to him, but she had long since done what she could to see that he survived his lone war with the Shadow. Now he must live or die without her.

It was Rand laughing, on his knees on the stones of the quay. Laughing, with tears streaming down a face twisted like a man being put to the question. Moiraine felt a chill. If the madness had him, it was beyond her. She could only do what she could do. What she must do.

The sight of Lanfear hit her like a blow. Not surprise, but the shock of seeing what had been in her dreams so often since Rhuidean. Lanfear standing on the wagon bed, blazing bright as the sun with *saidar*, framed by the twisted redstone *ter’angreal* as she stared down at Rand, a pitiless smile on her lips. She was turning a bracelet in her hands. An *angreal*; unless Rand had his own *angreal*, she should be able to crush him with that. Either he did, or Lanfear was toying with him. It did not matter. Moiraine did not like that circle of carved age-dark ivory. At first glance it seemed to be an acrobat bending backwards to grip his ankles. Only a closer look would show that his wrists and ankles were bound together. She did not like it, but she had brought it out of Rhuidean. Yesterday she had taken the bracelet from a sack of odds-and-ends and left it lying there at the foot of the doorframe.

Moiraine was slight, a small woman. Her weight did not disturb the wagon at all as she pulled herself up. She winced as her dress caught on a splinter and tore, but Lanfear did not look around. The woman had dealt with every threat except Rand; he was the only corner of the world she acknowledged in the least right then.

Suppressing a small bubble of hope—she could not allow herself that luxury—Moiraine balanced upright a moment on the wagon tail, then embraced the True Source and leaped at Lanfear. The Forsaken had an instant’s warning, enough to turn before Moiraine struck her, clawing the bracelet away. Face to face, they toppled through the doorframe *ter’angreal*. White light swallowed everything.

* * *

In the depths of a shrinking void, Rand saw Moiraine hurtle seemingly out of nowhere to grapple with Lanfear. The attacks on him ceased as the two women plunged through the doorframe *ter’angreal* in a flash of white light that did not end; it filled the subtly twisted redstone rectangle as though trying to

flood through and striking some invisible barrier. Lightnings arched silver and blue around the *ter'angreal*, more and more violently; rasping buzzes crackled through the air.

Rand staggered to his feet. The pain was not gone really, but the pressure was, bringing promise that the pain would go. His eyes could not leave the *ter'angreal*. Moiraine. Her name hung in his head, sliding across the void.

Lan lurched by him, fixed on the wagon, leaning as if only by moving forward could he stop from falling.

More than standing was beyond Rand for the moment. He channelled, caught the Warder in flows of Air. "You ... You can't do anything, Lan. You can't go after her."

"I know," Lan said hopelessly. Held in mid-step, he did not struggle, only stared at the *ter'angreal* that had swallowed Moiraine. "The Light send me peace, I know."

The wagon itself had caught fire now. Rand tried to suppress the flames, but as soon as he drew the heat from one blaze, the lightnings ignited another. The doorframe itself was beginning to smoke, though it was stone, a white, acrid smoke that gathered thickly under the grey dome. Even a whiff burned Rand's nostrils and made him cough; his skin prickled and stung where the smoke brushed. Hastily he untied the weave of the dome, dispelled it rather than wait for it to dissipate, and wove around the wagon a tall chimney of Air that gleamed like glass to carry the fumes high and away. Only then did he release Lan. He would not have put it past the man to follow Moiraine anyway if he could have reached the wagon. It was all in flames now, the redstone doorway as well, melting as if it were wax, but for a Warder that might not matter.

"She is gone. I cannot feel her presence." The words sounded ripped out of Lan's chest. He turned and began walking down the line of wagons without a backward glance.

The bond was gone. That meant ... they'd lost her.

Following the Warder with his eyes, Rand saw Aviendha on her knees, holding Dani. Releasing *saidin*, he began to run down the quay. Physical pain that had been distant crashed home, but he ran, however awkwardly. Grief rumbled on the horizon. Mat and Asmodean stood in the distance, looking around as if they expected Lanfear to leap out from behind a wagon or a toppled grain cart. And Ilyena, kneeling over Dani and fanning her with her hands while the other three hovered close.

Rand skidded to a halt. "Is she ...?"

"I don't know," Ilyena said furiously. "They hurt her. They *hurt* her!"

"She still breathes." Aviendha sounded uncertain how long that would continue, but Dani's eyes fluttered open as Amys and Bair pushed roughly past Rand with Melaine and Sorilea. The Wise Ones knelt clustered around the younger women, murmuring to themselves and each other as they examined Dani.

"I feel ..." Dani began weakly, and stopped to swallow. "I ... hurt." A tear leaked from one eye.

"Of course you do," Sorilea said briskly. "That is what happens when you let yourself be caught in a man's schemes."

"She cannot go with you, Rand al'Thor." Melaine's sun-haired beauty was openly angry, but she was not looking at him; it could have been anger at him or anger at what had happened.

"I ... will be fine ... with a little rest," Dani whispered.

Bair dampened a cloth from a waterskin and laid it across Dani's forehead. "You will be fine with a great deal of rest. Do not give me that stubborn look, girl. We will give your care to Sorilea if you so much as think of disobeying."

"You will not disobey me more than once, Aes Sedai or not," Sorilea said, but with a touch of sympathy at odds with her leathery-faced grimness. Frustration was plain in Dani's face.

"I, at least, am well enough to do what must be done," Aviendha said. In truth, she looked not much less haggard than Dani, but she managed a defiant stare at Rand, plainly expecting argument. Her defiance faded somewhat when she realized the four Wise Ones were looking at her. "I am," she muttered.

"Of course," Rand said hollowly.

"I am," she insisted. To him; she carefully avoided meeting the Wise Ones' gaze. "Lanfear had me a moment less than she did Daniele. That was enough to make the difference between us. I have *toh* to you, Rand al'Thor. I do not think we would have survived many moments more. She was very strong." Her eyes darted down to the burning wagon. Fierce flames had already reduced it to a

shapeless charred pile inside the glassy chimney; the redstone *ter'angreal* was no longer visible at all. "I did not see all that happened."

"They are ..." Rand cleared his throat. "They are both gone. Lanfear is dead. And so is Moiraine." Dani began to cry, sobs shaking her in Aviendha's clasp. Aviendha put her head down on the other woman's shoulder as if she, too, might weep.

"You are a fool, Rand al'Thor," Amys said, standing. That surprisingly youthful face beneath her headscarf and white hair was stone hard. "About this and many other things, you are a fool."

"It was never proper, and this is the result," Melaine said, resettling her shawl firmly. "Men have no more business ordering Aes Sedai about than they do Wise Ones. Even the *Car'a'carn*."

Pedra nodded firmly, and none of the others gainsaid them.

He turned away from the accusation in their eyes. Moiraine was dead. Dead because he could not bring himself to kill a woman, even one of the Forsaken. He did not know whether he wanted to cry or laugh wildly; if he did either, he did not think he would be able to stop.

The dockside that had been emptying when he made the dome was filled again, though few came nearer than where that misty grey wall had stood. Wise Ones moved about aiding the burned, comforting the dying, assisted by white-robed *gai'shain* and men in the *cadin'sor*. Mayam rushed over to help, bypassing several downed men to go to her knees beside one twitching figure. One of her special friends perhaps. He saw her start to Heal as he was turning away. Moans and cries stabbed at him. He had not been quick enough. Moiraine dead. Because he ... *I could not. The Light help me, I could not!*

More Aielmen stood watching him, some only now unveiling; he still did not see one Maiden. Not only Aiel were there. Dobraine, bareheaded on a black gelding, did not take his eyes from Rand and not far off Talmanes and Nalesean and Daerid sat their horses watching Mat almost as closely as they did Rand. People lined the top of the great city wall, outlined and cast in shadow by the rising sun, and more along the curtain walls. Two of those shadowed shapes turned away when he looked up, saw each other only twenty paces apart, and seemed to recoil. He would have wagered they were Meilan and Maringil.

Lan was back with the horses at the last wagon in the line, stroking Aldieb's white nose. Moiraine's mare.

Rand went to him. "I'm sorry, Lan. If I'd been faster, if I'd ..." He exhaled heavily. *I couldn't kill one, so I killed the other. The Light burn me blind!* If it had, at that moment, he would not have cared.

"The Wheel weaves." Lan went to Mandarb, busied himself checking the black stallion's saddlegirth. "She was a soldier, a warrior in her way as much as I. This could have happened two hundred times these past twenty years. She knew it, and so did I. It was a good day to die." His voice was as hard as it had ever been, but those cold blue eyes were red-rimmed.

"Still, I am sorry. I should have ..." The man would not be comforted by should-haves, and they dug at Rand's soul.

Lan adjusted his horse's reins, still not looking. "I am sorry also. You were good to her. Better than either of us expected. It was rare for her to feel such things, but duty must always come first."

That threatened his resolve but he held strong. "I hope you can still be my friend, Lan, after ... I value your counsel—and your sword-training—and I'll need both in the days to come."

"I am your friend, Rand. But I cannot stay." Lan swung up into his saddle. "Moiraine did something to me that has not been done in hundreds of years, not since the time when Aes Sedai were still allowed to bond a Warder whether he wanted it or not. She altered my bond so it passed to another when she died. Now I must find that other, become one of her Warders. I am one, already. I can feel her faintly, somewhere far to the west, and she can feel me. I must go, Rand. It is part of what Moiraine did. She said she would not allow me time to die avenging her." He gripped the reins as if holding Mandarb back, as if holding himself back from digging his spurs in. "If you ever see Nynaeve again, tell her ..." For an instant that stone face crumpled in anguish; an instant, then it was granite again. He muttered under his breath, but Rand heard. "A clean wound heals quickest and pains shortest." Aloud, he said, "Tell her I've found someone else. Green sisters are sometimes as close to their Warders as other women are to husbands. In every way. Tell her I've gone to be a Green sister's lover, as well as her sword. These things happen. It has been a long time since I've seen her."

"I will tell her whatever you say, Lan, but I don't know that she'll believe me."

Lan bent from the saddle to catch Rand's shoulder in a hard grip. Rand remembered calling the man a half-tame wolf, but those eyes made a wolf seem a lapdog. "We are alike in many ways, you and I. There is a darkness in us. Darkness, pain, death. They radiate from us. If ever you love a woman, Rand, leave her and let her find another. It will be the best gift you can give her." Straightening, he raised one hand. "Peace favour your sword. *Tai'shar* Manetheren." The ancient salute. True blood of Manetheren.

Rand lifted his hand. "*Tai'shar* Malkier."

Lan heeled Mandarb's flanks, and the stallion leaped forward, scattering Aiel and everyone else from his path, as if to carry the last of the Malkieri wherever he was headed at a gallop the entire way.

"The last embrace of the mother welcome you home, Lan," Rand murmured, then shivered. That was part of the funeral service in Shienar, and elsewhere in the Borderlands.

They were still watching him, the Aiel, the people atop the walls. The Tower would know of today, or a version of it, as soon as a pigeon could fly there. If Rahvin did have some way of watching as well—all it took was one raven in the city, one rat here along the river—he certainly would not expect anything today. Elaida would think him weakened, perhaps more pliable, and Rahvin ...

He realized what he was doing and winced. *Stop it! For one minute at least, stop and mourn!*

He did not want all those eyes on him. Aiel fell back before him almost as readily as they had before Mandarb.

The dockmaster's slate-roofed hut was a single windowless stone room lined with shelves full of ledgers and scrolls and papers, lit by two lamps on a rough table covered with tax seals and customs stamps. Rand slammed the door behind him to shut out eyes. Moiraine dead, Dani injured, and Lan gone. A high price to pay for Lanfear.

"Mourn, burn you!" he growled. "She deserved that much! Don't you have any feelings left?" But mostly he felt numb. His body hurt, but under it was deadness.

Hunching his shoulders, he stuffed his hands into his pockets and felt Moiraine's letters. Slowly he drew them out. Some things he should think on, she had said. Stuffing Thom's back, he broke the seal on the other. The pages were covered thickly with Moiraine's elegant script.

These words will fade within moments after this leaves your hands—a warding attuned to you—so be careful of it. That you are reading this means that events have fallen out at the docks as I hoped ...

He stopped, staring, then read on quickly.

Since the first day I reached Rhuidean, I have known—it need not trouble you how; some secrets belong to others, and I will not betray them—that a day would come in Cairhien when news would arrive of Morgase. I did not know what that would be—if what we heard is true, the Light have mercy on her soul; she was wilful and stubborn, with the temper of a lioness at times, but for all that a true, good and gracious queen—but each time that news led to the docks on the following day. There were three branches from the docks, but if you are reading this, I am gone, and so is Lanfear ...

Rand's hands tightened on the pages. She had known. Known, and still she brought him here. Hurriedly he smoothed out the crumpled paper.

The other two paths were much worse. Down one, Lanfear killed you. Down the other, she carried you away, and when next we saw you, you called yourself Lews Therin Telamon and were her devoted lover.

I hope that Daniele and Aviendha have survived unharmed. You see, I do not know what happens in the world after, except perhaps for one small thing which does not concern you.

I could not tell you, for the same reason I could not tell Lan. Even given the choices, I could not be sure which you would pick. Men of the Theren, it seems, retain much of storied Manetheren in them, traits shared with men of the Borderlands. It is said that a Borderlander will take a dagger's wound to avoid harm to a woman and count it fair trade. I dared not risk that you would place my life above your own, certain that somehow you could sidestep fate. Not a risk, I fear, but a foolish certainty, as today has surely proved ...

“My choice, Moiraine,” he muttered. “It was my choice.”

A few final points.

If Lan has not already gone, tell him that what I did to him, I did for the best. He will understand one day, and I hope, bless me for it.

Trust no woman fully who is now Aes Sedai. I do not speak simply of the Black Ajah, though you must always be watchful for them. Be as suspicious of Verin as you are of Alviarin. We have made the world dance as we sang for three thousand years. That is a difficult habit to break, as I have learned while dancing to your song. You must dance free, and even the best intentioned of my sisters may well try to guide your steps as I once did.

Do not, however, let this wise caution drive from your side those who are worthy of your trust. Nynaeve, Elayne and Daniele, at the very least, possess a devotion to your cause to match my own and are not wholly unwise. Daniele’s advice concerning Rahvin was sound. I would ask that you heed it, and take counsel with Elayne before making your decision there.

Please deliver Thom Merrilin’s letter safely when you meet him again. There is a small matter that I once told him of which I must make clear for his peace of mind.

Lastly, be wary, too, of Master Jasin Natael. I cannot approve wholly, but I understand. Perhaps it was the only way. Yet be careful of him. He is the same man now that he always was. Remember that always.

May the Light illumine and protect you. You will do well.

It was signed simply “Moiraine.” She had almost never used her House name.

He reread the second last paragraph again closely. Somehow she had known who Asmodean was. It had to be that. Known that one of the Forsaken was right there in front of her, and never blinked once. She had known why, too, if he read it right. He would have thought in a letter that would go blank when he set it down, she could have come right out and said what she meant. Not just concerning Asmodean. About how she had learned what she had in Rhuidean—something to do with Wise Ones, or he missed his guess, and as much chance of finding out more from the letter as from them—about Aes Sedai—was there a reason she mentioned Verin? And why Alviarin instead of Elaida?—even about Thom and Lan. For some reason he did not think she had left a letter for Lan; the Warder was not the only one who believed in clean wounds. He almost took Thom’s letter out and opened it, but she might have warded it the same way she had his. Aes Sedai and Cairhienin, she had wrapped herself in mystery and manipulation to the end. To the end.

That was what he was trying to avoid with all this blather about her keeping secrets. She had known what would happen and come as bravely as any Aiel. Come to her death knowing it waited. She had died because he could not bring himself to kill Lanfear. He could not kill one woman, so another died. His eyes fell on the last words.

... You will do well. They cut like a cold razor. If he just let go of the letter they would disappear, but instead his grip tightened. There was more, he now noticed. Another fold, another passage, under the signature. She had added this sometime after composing her farewell. He unfolded it and read.

I should not have seduced you as I did. It is wrong to feel for you what I feel. Worse to try and make you feel what my treacherous heart wants you to feel for me. Please know that I am sorry for what pain this parting may cause. I was weak, in the end, for never have I felt more alive than in these final months in your arms. If you have cared for me also, then heed me now and do not allow this parting to weigh you down. You must dance free, on an arm not mine. I smile to think of you so.

Rand almost wished he was back in Sindhol. His throat felt seared.

“Why do you weep here alone, Rand al’Thor? I have heard that some wetlanders think it is shame to be seen weeping.”

He glared at Sulin, standing in the doorway. She was fully accoutred, cased bow on her back, quiver at her belt, round hide buckler and three spears in hand. “I’m not ...” There was dampness on

his cheeks. He scrubbed it away. His eyes were burning. "It's hot in here. Makes me sweat like a ... What do you want? I thought you had all decided to abandon me and go back to the Three-fold Land."

"It is not we who have abandoned you, Rand al'Thor." Shutting the door behind her, she sat on the floor and laid her buckler and a pair of the spears down. "You have abandoned us." In one motion she put a foot against the last spear between her hands, heaved, and snapped it in two.

"What are you doing?" She tossed aside the pieces and picked up another spear. "I said, what are you doing?" The white-haired Maiden's face might have given even Lan pause, but Rand bent and seized the spear between her hands; her soft-booted foot came to rest against his knuckles. Not lightly.

"Will you put us in skirts, and make us marry and tend hearth? Or are we to lie beside your fire and lick your hand when you give us a scrap of meat?" Her muscles tensed, and the spear broke, scoring his palm with splinters.

He snatched his freed hand back with a curse, shaking off droplets of blood. "I don't mean any such thing. I thought you understood." She took up the last spear, set her foot, and he channelled, weaving Air to hold her as she was. She only stared at him wordlessly. "Burn me, you said nothing! So I kept the Maidens out of the battle with Couladin. Not everyone fought that day. And you never said a word."

Sulin's eyes widened in incredulity. "You kept *us* from the dance of spears? *We* kept *you* from the dance. You were like a girl newly wed to the spear, ready to rush out and kill Couladin with never a thought for the spear you might take from behind. You are the *Car'a'carn*. You have no right to risk yourself needlessly." Her voice flattened. "Now you go to fight the Forsaken. The secret is well kept, but I have heard enough from those who lead the other societies."

"And you want to keep me out of this fight as well?" he said quietly.

"Do not be a fool, Rand al'Thor. Any could have danced the spears with Couladin; for you to risk it was the thinking of a child. None among us can face the Shadowsouled, save you."

"Then why ...?" He stopped; he already knew the answer. After that blood-soaked day against Couladin, he had convinced himself they would not mind. He had wanted to believe they would not.

"Those who go with you have been chosen." The words came like hurled stones. "Men from every society. Men. There are no Maidens, Rand al'Thor. *Far Dareis Mai* carries your honour, and you take ours away."

He drew a deep breath, fumbling for words. "I ... do not like to see a woman die. I hate it Sulin. It curdles me up inside. I could not kill a woman if my life hung on it." The pages of Moiraine's letter rustled in his hand. Dead because he could not kill Lanfear. Not always just his own life. "Sulin, I would rather go against Rahvin alone than see one of you die."

"A foolish thing. Everyone needs another to watch her back. So it is Rahvin. Even Roidan of the Thunder Walkers and Turol of the Stone Dogs held that back." She glanced at her upraised foot, held against the spear by the same flows that snared her arms. "Release me, and we will talk."

After a moment's hesitation, he unravelled the weave. He was tensed to seize her again if need be, but she only crossed her legs and sat bouncing the spear on her palms. "Sometimes I forget you were raised out of our blood, Rand al'Thor. Listen to me. I am what I am. *This* is what I am." She hefted the spear.

"Sulin—"

"Listen, Rand al'Thor. I *am* the spear. When a lover came between me and the spear, I chose the spear. Some chose the other way. Some decide they have run with the spears long enough, that they want a husband, a child. I have never wanted anything else. No chief would hesitate to send me wherever the dance is hottest. If I died there, my first-sisters would mourn me, but not a fingernail more than when our first-brother fell. A treekiller who stabbed me to the heart in my sleep would do me more honour than you do. Do you understand now?"

"I understand, but ..." He did understand. She did not want him to make her something other than what she was. All he had to do was be willing to watch her die. "What happens if you break the last spear?"

"If I have no honour in this life, perhaps in another." She said it as if it was just another explanation. It took him a moment to comprehend. All he had to do was be willing to watch her die.

"You don't leave me any choices, do you?" No more than Moiraine had.

"There are always choices, Rand al'Thor. You have a choice, and I have one. *Ji'e'toh* allows no other."

He wanted to snarl at her, to curse *ji'e'toh* and everyone who followed it. "Choose out your Maidens, Sulin. I don't know how many I can take, but *Far Dareis Mai* will have as many as any other society."

He stalked past her and her sudden smile. Not relief. Pleasure. Pleasure that she would have the chance to die. He should have left her wrapped up in *saidin*, left her to be dealt with somehow when he came back from Caemlyn. If he went to Caemlyn. Moiraine had asked that he confess his sin to Elayne, and he could not deny her either. Slamming the door open, he strode out onto the quay—and stopped.

Enaila headed a line of Maidens, each with three spears in her hands, a line leading back from the dockmaster's door, vanishing into the nearest of the gates to the city. Some of the Aielmen on the dockside eyed them curiously, but it was obviously something between *Far Dareis Mai* and the *Car'a'carn*, and no business of any other society. Amys and three or four other Wise Ones who had once been Maidens were watching more closely. Most of the non-Aiel had gone, except for a few men nervously righting overturned grain carts and trying to look elsewhere. Enaila stepped toward Rand, then halted and smiled as Sulin came out. Not relief. Pleasure. Smiles of pleasure running back down that long line of Maidens. Smiles on those Wise Ones, too, and a sharp nod for him from Amys as if he had put an end to some idiotic behaviour.

"I thought maybe they were going to go in one at a time and kiss you out of your miseries," Mat said.

Rand frowned at him, standing there leaning on his spear and grinning, wide-brimmed hat tipped back on his head. "How can you be so cheerful?" The smell of seared flesh still hung in the air, and the moans of burned men and women being cared for by Wise Ones.

"Because I'm alive," Mat snarled. "What do you want me to do, cry?" He shrugged uncomfortably. "Amys says Dani really will be alright in a few days." He did look around then, but as though he did not want to see what he saw. "Burn me, if we're going to do this thing, let's do it. *Dovie'andi se tovyu sagain.*"

"What?"

"I said, it's time to roll the dice. Did Sulin stop up your ears?"

"It is not time to roll the dice just yet," Rand said. The flames had died inside the glassy chimney of Air, but the white smoke still rose as though flames yet consumed the *ter'angreal*. *Moiraine*. He should have ... Done was done. The Maidens were crowding down around Sulin, as many as would fit onto the quay. Done was done, and he had to live with it. Death would be a release from what he had to live with. "There's someone I need to speak to first."

CHAPTER 25: *The King and His General*



Even with Lanfear gone the Wise Ones had been reluctant to arrange the meeting. If they had not already taught Rand how to use *Tel'aran'rhiod*, he thought they might have refused altogether. But what could they do when he threatened to do it alone if they did not?

They and Aviendha took Dani off to the tents with them once those who could be treated had been treated. Ilyena and Mayam went with her in their concern, leaving a wary Theodrin and an accusatory Pedra to flank Rand as he rode back to the palace. Moiraine was gone. It was hard to believe, harder to endure. He hadn't realised how much he'd relied on her being around to pick up his slack until she was no longer there. As nice as she was, Theodrin was a flimsy successor.

Rumours of what had happened at the docks were flying around the city. Many came to stand at balconies or lurk in doorways to gawk at Rand's return, but few had the nerve to approach and ask him what had happened. Or perhaps they just knew him better. Breane Taborwin and High Lord Aracome shared the harsh side of his tongue when *they* asked. Others, perhaps wiser, chose to pick Mat's brain for answers instead.

There were others, closer to him, that he could not drive off so easily. Izana's concerns raised Mat's brows, while Tam's insight tightened them. Aca must have told him about Melindhra, for he was as solicitous of Mat as he was of Rand. At least Mat had had the guts to do what he had to, even if it was a monstrous sin. Rand? He struggled to be gentle with Izana, and with Raine when she found them in a carpeted hallway. He assured her he was okay, then told her Dani was not and watched in relief as she ran off to check on her. Lan's last advice had been good. He hated it, but it had been good. Knowing it was so didn't give him the strength not to sit with Merile for half an hour while she wept over the news.

It was a miserable day, all told. Moiraine's writing had faded as promised, but her words were seared onto his mind. She had gone to her death, knowing that if she did not Rand would fall. He had loved her. And she had died because he was weak.

Merile left him eventually, saying she had to go and see Dani. Even Izana could not endure his company in that mood. Mat came and went and came again, sometimes with Talmanes and Nalesean for company. He spoke of leaving, sometimes for Tear, sometimes for Caemlyn. Sometimes together, sometimes alone. Claiming that he was needed and had a duty drove him away once, but he came back later to complain that he had no duty to anyone but that he might take some revenge on Rahvin or Sammael, if he felt like it. Rand was too tired to argue.

He did everyone the favour of retreating to his rooms early. It gave him the chance to examine his gifts from the Eelfinn with only Asmodean for company. His captive audience, and his unwilling test subject.

"Just do it. It's not like you need to cut off a finger or something," Rand said disgustedly. "Just a little cut will do."

They were in the office of Rand's private quarters, an oppressive room of dark-panelled walls and even darker blackwood furnishings. The previous rulers of Cairhien had apparently thought that any missives should be read or written in as close to pitch darkness as possible. It suited Rand's mood. A resentful Asmodean sat in one of the wooden chairs before the heavy blackwood desk Rand leant against, the belt knife Rand had given him held in his hands.

"I've shown you the weaves. Is that not enough?"

"No. They need testing. Cut," Rand said curtly.

He grimaced, and Rand had no doubt he'd rather have cut him than his own hand, but Asmodean laid the knife across his palm and sawed it along as ordered. Lips peeled back from white teeth, and he showed his bloody hand and angry scowl both. Rand was more interested in the former, and what he could do about it.

Seizing *saidin*, he welcomed the rush of power that being filled with *the* Power always brought, and dismissed the taint. It was redundant. He was already mad enough to let a woman he loved die rather than kill a woman he ... despised. What need had he for the taint?

Rand took Asmodean's hand in his and concentrated on the shallow gash. He wove all five of the elements together slowly and carefully, just as he remembered being shown. It hadn't worked at all before, but this time the weave formed with surprising ease. He placed it on Asmodean and watched as the cut sealed itself almost instantly. His light grunt was echoed by the Forsaken. So the fox folk had actually done it. From the way they'd been behaving, he'd thought they must have cheated him in some way.

"They altered you in this way?" Asmodean said, watching out of the corner of his eye.

"Maybe I just didn't do it right last time," Rand said. It was a poor evasion but what did it matter? Asmodean was tied to him like a hanged man to the scaffold now. The only person who might have lifted the charge of betrayal from him was dead. His crowing over that hadn't lasted long. Lanfear's fate sat very poorly on Rand's conscience. He hated that she was dead, and he hated that he hadn't killed her. No, the taint wasn't needed at all.

Silently demanding and receiving the return of his knife, Rand went around the table to examine the items sitting there. As he went, he saw reflected in one of the mirrors hung above unlit lamps the dark look the Forsaken shot at his back. Tied or not, the man was no friend of Rand's. He sat in the padded armchair behind the desk, in the fresh shirt and trousers he'd changed into, and looked over his prizes. It wasn't much of a haul.

"Are these *ter'angreal*? Can you tell what they do?" he asked.

Asmodean shook his head. "I have no Talent for that. If they are you should be careful how you use them, and only feed them Power when I am elsewhere."

"Ah, but what would you do if I died?"

"Not much, but a few moments longer are still desirable," he said shamelessly.

Rand ignored that to study the items. The medallion looked fancy, at least. The other two could have been found in any market in Valgarda. He turned them over in his hands yet again, and found nothing resembling an answer on any of the items. There was nothing for it really. He'd gone to all that trouble. He had to test them.

"Be elsewhere," he told Asmodean.

"Shall I tell the Aiel to come check on you in half an hour?" he asked as he rose.

It was a decent suggestion, little as he liked the source. "You do that," he said flatly.

Rand waited until Asmodean was long gone before taking the rose-gold chain in his hands. Sight of the symbol made Lews Therin grumble but no ranting words or unnatural knowing drifted across the divide between them this time.

To prevent the next Breaking and free mankind from the matriarchy. That was what he'd asked them for. He could not see how this medal was supposed to help with either of those things. Carefully, he fed a thread of Spirit to the medal. His brows rose when it drank his thread. An unwoven thread like that would have just passed right through anything normal, leaving no effect until turned into a weave of some kind. It was a *ter'angreal* he held, then. He fed it some Fire as well, then added Earth, then Wind. Nothing happened. He channelled a thread of Water and touched it to the medal just as carefully ... and sucked in a breath.

Rand dropped the *ter'angreal* to the desk, hands jerking away as if burned. They *felt* burned too, burned deep down inside. Not just his hands, the sensation was spreading. *Blood and ashes*. He might have made a mistake. *Woolheaded fool!* He'd been warned often enough not to play with strange *ter'angreal*. He tried to get up, feeling and hearing his bones creak like an old man's. His chest felt tight. His stomach was worse, as if a dozen blacksmiths were taking turns punching him. Some of those blacksmiths had turned their attention to his face by the time he managed to drag himself around the desk. He was halfway to the door when they went for his crotch. He didn't remember much after that.

When Rand woke he was down on his side on the dark blue carpet of his office. The pain had receded and he was alive, luckily. "Luckier than you deserve," he said in a voice made squeaky by the ordeal. He had no idea how long he'd been out. His trousers were digging into his hips painfully; he must have fallen in an awkward manner.

He pushed himself up with one hand, and froze, frowning down. His Dragon-backed hand looked ... weird. Smaller. The fingers thinner. More, there was a ... dangling sensation where no dangling sensation was supposed to be. His free hand shakily touched the front of his loose shirt, and touched something soft underneath. Soft and substantial enough that he might have enjoyed touching it, if only he couldn't so completely feel it being touched.

"What in the Light!?"

Clambering to his feet, Rand tried to tell himself that the very noticeable bounce he was feeling was not what it seemed. He staggered to the mirror and stared at the horrified face he found there. The pale eyes looked like his, but bigger. The hair was just as red, but longer, the skin just as pale but smoother. The lips of the gaping mouth were significantly fuller than his. It was a face he'd never seen, not really, but it was one he recognised at once. Raye had looked just like that. But he was not Raye!

His hands slapped to chest and waist and crotch, feeling the intrusive additions and the panic-inducing lacks. "How!? Why!?" he squeaked. Even his voice was different!

A way to free mankind from the dominion of the matriarchy. A ter'angreal that could turn men in women ... He saw Raye's face go red, and not in a coquettish manner. It became a red ball of fury.

"You cheating bastards!" he shouted in a voice annoyingly lacking in timbre. No wonder they had laughed! They'd probably been imagining this even while they were skinning him! His heart was racing. He'd have paced a furious circuit of the office if only his trousers weren't already struggling to contain those too-wide hips and the globular cheeks behind them.

Light! Was it permanent? The thought of having to explain this to anyone was horrifying. But ... Rand reached for *saidin*, and was almost disappointed to feel it flow through him once more, bringing the rancid taint with it. If it had actually been untainted *saidar* he could channel like this ... then the foxes would have done him a favour, intentionally or not.

As it was, all they'd done was make a fool of him. And a woman. Gulping, he went to the desk and snatched up the rose-gold medallion. There was still a chance this would be nothing more than a bad joke, if only ... He channelled again, feeding all five of the Powers into the *ter'angreal*.

The pain came again, and Rand welcomed it with a lover's sigh. He collapsed onto the chair as, once again, his body began to rearrange itself. In silence he let it run its course, and still sat there, breathing deeply, when the pain began to recede. With a shaking hand he touched his chest. His hard and muscular chest. Down below, his hand found a bulge that twitched in response to his touch.

"Thank the Light."

Rand got up and went to the mirror, where a much more familiar face looked back at him in weary chagrin. Pinching the rose-gold chain gingerly between thumb and finger, he opened one of the desk drawers and dropped it in atop some loose papers. Then he slammed the drawer closed with more force than was needed.

He frowned sourly at the manacle and gag. After that debacle, he held little hope, but he had to test them anyway. The thread of Spirit he channelled went straight through the gag, and did the same for the bronze manacle. Not *ter'angreal*, just regular items. How in the Light were they supposed to help him prevent the Breaking?

A gag, to stop him speaking. Manacles, to stop him from acting. *Do nothing*. That was their solution. The only solution. Rand couldn't even find it in him to be angry. He'd have found it in him to throttle some foxy necks, though, if he had any in front of him right then. Hope had been lost on the other side of that doorway, lost along with Moiraine.

Leaving the trash they'd "gifted" him where it sat, he plodded wearily out of the office to the miniature throne room beyond.

It was still light out. He'd have to wait a while until the appointed hour to meet Elayne and tell her what he had let happen. With a grimace, he dropped onto the carved throne they'd made him. He'd have to tell her about her aunt and her mother both. Light. He was rubbing at his forehead when the door opened and a Maiden slipped in.

Enaila looked curious. "Jasin Natael said you wished to speak to one of us."

"I've changed my mind. It's fine. I won't need you again tonight."

She shook her head. "You change your mind far too often, Rand al'Thor. When you are grown up, people will expect you to be more decisive."

"Close the door behind you," he said decisively. She didn't appreciate the humour.

Perhaps that was why she didn't come with Mat when he returned yet again a while later. "Maidens are bloody weird," he muttered, foolishly not waiting until the door was fully closed. "Or maybe it's where all my bad luck went. Dailin, Dorindha ..."

Melindhra.

It was quite the list. Rand wondered how long his own would get, and his hand tightened on the throne. Moiraine's name would sit atop it.

"What brings you back this time, Mat?" he said tiredly. "Did you change your mind again about commanding the army?"

"Do I have a choice?" he groused.

"Do any of us?"

Mat snorted. "Bloody rich saying that when you're sitting on a throne. It's ugly as a pig's side bit, by the way, in case your suck ups haven't told you."

Rand didn't raise his head from where it lolled against the chairback. "I know. Tairen and Cairhienin fashions are bad enough, but a Cairhienin chair made in what they imagine a Tairen style to be? Bloody hideous."

"Then why did you keep it, you loon?"

"Meh. Some people, they see you on a throne and think that means you're in charge. Keeps them from starting trouble. A bit, anyway."

Muttering to himself, Mat went and dropped into one of the nearest gilded chairs, leaving his spear propped against another on the way. He sent his broad-brimmed hat spinning to land neatly on the seat opposite. "Trouble always finds us in the end, doesn't it?"

He sounded uncharacteristically serious. Rand nodded. "Not just us."

Mat leaned back and sighed. "Yeah. Wish it wouldn't. Wish there was never another battle anywhere in my future."

"For what it's worth, I'd like it if that was true."

"Same for you. Sorry about Moiraine. She was ... a good-looking woman. Brave as they come."

His throat felt tight again. "She was," he managed. "I'm sorry that things went the way they went with Melindhra, too."

"Sammael," Mat growled. "Twice now. Do you ever get the feeling you're being pushed into something by some invisible bully that you really want to punch but just can't?"

"Every moment of every day since that first Trolloc kicked in our door."

"Guess you would. Life sucks, Rand."

"Death sucks more."

He huffed a laugh. "Isn't that the truth! Make the bloody most of it, that's what we need to do. How'd it go with the foxes?"

Rand sat forward with a sigh, resting his elbows on knees. "They fucked me," he said. "Not literally, but close enough."

"I told you so," Mat said with a little shrug.

"That you did," he admitted easily.

"That's what you get for thinking I'm some kind of fool."

He shook his head slowly. "I've never thought that. You've been right plenty of times."

Mat slumped in his chair, scowling for some reason. "Well. Fine. You ... You've done some pretty impressive things yourself."

"Want to do some impressive things together?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" Mat asked warily.

"Save a nation from the Shadow by killing one of the Forsaken," he said casually, from his throne.

"That sounds like a job for some kind of fool hero."

Rand smiled. "That or a pair of jaded lads with some scores to settle."

"I suppose I could let myself be persuaded," Mat allowed.

"Good." It was, too. It lifted Rand's mood more than he had expected. He looked Mat over, from his familiar colouring and expressive face, to the perpetually rumpled clothes he was half-wearing. His oldest friend. Estranged ever since learning he could channel, but his friend still, deep down. He'd been content to let him go, and hope he found happiness wherever he ended up, but it was

damn good to think he might actually stay. “Is there anything I could do to persuade you?” he asked quietly.

Mat messed his own hair up even more. “Ah ... what do you mean?”

Rand had always been the more serious of the two. The more honest. “I don’t want to be alone tonight.”

For all his brashness, Mat had difficulty meeting his eye. “Neither do I,” he said, and blushed.

Rand rose slowly and started for the door behind the dais. Mat followed, neither of them in any great haste. Inside, he offered refreshments that Mat accepted easily. He didn’t kiss him, push him against the wall, or claw at his clothes. They’d done all those things before, but not now. Now they just started casually undressing, a pair of weary and heartsick lads with a long history.

The low lamps showed all. Mat’s body, when he finished baring it, was lean and showed far more scars than Rand was used to seeing on him. He said as much, concerned, but Mat shrugged it off. He kept his scarf on, though, the black one that covered the evidence of his hanging. Rand, who received regular Healing from the channelers Mat so distrusted, had only the brands on his palms and the unhealing wound in his side to compare with.

They still hadn’t touched each other when they climbed into bed from either side. He noted the foxhead medallion that Mat did not remove, but refused to be hurt by the unspoken message. In what way, after all, was it unfair? He was what he was.

It was enough that Mat was still willing to touch him, despite it all. And allow himself to be touched. It was the scars Rand’s hands were drawn to. Those and his gentle lips. He’d seen and done a lot in these short years, Mat. Too much of it dark and painful for such a young and free spirit. There were no smirks tonight. No teasing or ribald comments. His dark eyes were wide in their silence as he lay there and let Rand’s hands and lips brush over him. When he eventually ventured lower, he found a stiff rod waiting for his grip.

Now the breathing quickened, in and out, up and down. Rand’s own member had thickened as well. He kissed his way up towards the scarf, but did not try to dislodge it. “Do you want to go first, or should I?” he asked.

“You’re doing a pretty good job,” Mat whispered. “Why stop?”

He kissed Rand on the lips, just the once, but it was a sweet thing. Onto his belly he went. There were scars on his back, too, but his cute bottom remained unharmed. It would remain so, if Rand had his way. He seized *saidin* long enough to perform a thorough slickening, positioned himself between Mat’s legs, and between his cheeks besides, and slid slowly inside. Sighs were the extent of the noise they made. That and the small sounds of the kisses Rand placed on each unwelcome new scar he found on his friend’s back.

It felt good to be inside him once again, but Rand was unruled by lust. Slow he went, his weight his own to support. He had inflicted pain enough, and would inflict more before the night was finished, but not then, and not Mat.

He dared to dream that, in letting him have his way with him like that, Mat was saying that he would finally stop running from him and what they were to each other. It was a pleasant dream, and it was with it in mind that Rand came.

He shuddered as he did so. It was more an easing than an explosive pleasure, almost as if pain and grief were flowing out of him along with his come. He sighed when it was done, slid out and rolled off. He wasn’t even breathing heavy.

“Feeling better?” Mat asked.

“I actually am. Thanks.”

“Well, it’s not like I’m doing you a favour. It’s a mutual thing.”

Rand smiled. “It was. And will be.”

He would have liked to rest, and probably should have. The hour of the meeting was drawing near. But he pushed the sheets aside and got up on his hands and knees instead, facing the door his ugly throne lay beyond, ass towards Mat. He performed the slickening again, this time on himself, then set the Power aside, set all power aside, and waited for Mat to take him.

Rand didn’t have to wait long. He felt the bed shift, hands on his buttocks, something stiff and wet pressing against something tight and wetter.

“Why are you—? Never mind. I don’t want to know,” Mat said.

If it spoiled anything for him, or changed his mind—again—about Rand, it did not show in the way he penetrated him. He went every bit as slow as Rand had. Accepting? Forgiving? He didn't say and Rand didn't ask, but it was nice to imagine it so. He probed dark places and did not scorn. He reached deep and touched gentle. Once fully inside, he cradled Rand's hips, rested his head against his back, and began to move in a slow, comforting tempo.

Relaxing was required when being taken so, and relaxing was exactly what Rand needed. He didn't need to do so for very long, however. Mat must have enjoyed his ministrations earlier, for it took a lot less time than usual for him to climax. Rand stayed relaxed, and welcomed everything he was willing to give.

When Mat slid out, he fell to his bed with his feet towards the pillows. Rand lay down the other way. "I needed that," he said.

Mat grunted agreement. "I'd better go, though. People would talk if I stayed here tonight."

Rand stretched, and let his eyes drift shut. "It's a big tower. How would they know?"

"They'd know," Mat muttered. "I'll go ... in a minute. I just wanna ... rest my eyes a bit."

"It's up to you, Mat. Long as you understand, that I don't want you to go; it's up to you."

Mat either had no response or did not hear. Rand thought it was the latter. He had no difficulty falling asleep that night either. He found it easier than ever to dream.

CHAPTER 26: *A Vengeance Taken*



Back in the real world, Nynaeve was lying in bed channelling a flow of Spirit to the iron disk in her pouch. Here in *Tel'aran'rhiod*, she scowled at the woman standing in front of her on a Salidar street, a street empty save for them, a few flies, and one fox that paused to look at them curiously before trotting on. Even the feel of unseen eyes could not touch her through her anger this morning.

"You must concentrate," Nynaeve barked. "You had more control than this the first time. Concentrate!"

"I *am* concentrating, you fool girl!" Suian's plain blue wool dress was suddenly silk. The seven-striped stole of the Amyrlin Seat hung around her neck, and a golden serpent bit its own tail on her finger. Frowning at Nynaeve, she did not seem aware of the change, though she had already worn the same five times today. "If there's any difficulty, it lies in that foul-tasting brew you fed me! Faagh! I can still taste it. Like flatfish gall." Stole and ring vanished; the silk dress's high neck plunged low enough to show the twisted stone ring, dangling between her breasts on a fine gold chain.

"If you didn't insist on me teaching you when you needed something to help you sleep, you wouldn't need it." So there had been a little sheepstongue root and a few other things that were not really necessary in the mix. The woman deserved to have her tongue curdled.

"You can hardly teach me when you're teaching Sheriam and the others." The silk paled; the neck was high again, surrounded by a white lace ruff, and a cap of pearls fitted close on Suian's hair. "Or would you rather I came after them? You claim you need some sleep undisturbed."

Nynaeve quivered, fists clenched at her sides. Sheriam and the others were not the worst thing stoking her anger, even as dismissive as they were of their warnings about the Forsaken. She and Elayne took turns bringing them to *Tel'aran'rhiod* two at a time, sometimes all six in one night, and even if she was the teacher they never let her forget she was Accepted and they Aes Sedai. One sharp word when they made a foolish mistake ... Elayne had only been sent to scrub pots once, but Nynaeve's hands were shrivelled from hot, soapy water; back where her body lay sleeping they were, anyway. But they were not the worst. Nor was the fact that she barely had a moment to spare for investigating what, if anything, could be done about Stilling and Gentling. Logain was more cooperative than Suian and Leane in any case, or at least more eager. Thank the Light he understood about keeping it secret. Or thought he did; he probably believed she would Heal him eventually. No, worse than that was that Faolain had been tested and raised ... not Aes Sedai—not without the Oath Rod, which was tight in the Tower—but to something more than Accepted. Faolain wore any dress she chose now, and if she could not wear the shawl or choose an Ajah, she had been given other authority. Nynaeve thought she had fetched more cups of water, more books—left deliberately, she was sure!—more pins and inkjars and other useless things in the last four days than she had her entire stay in the Tower. Her anger could have heated a house in winter.

"What's put a hook in your gills today, girl?" Suian had on a gown like those Leane wore, only more sheer than even Leane would ever wear in public, so thin it was hard to tell what colour it was. Not the first time she had had that on today, either. What was perking around in the back of the woman's mind? In the World of Dreams, things like these changes of clothing betrayed thoughts you might not even know you had. "You have been almost decent company until today," Suian continued irritably.

Nynaeve gaped in answer, not at Suian but at the pale-haired woman who was suddenly standing behind her. Amys' tanned face was set and composed, but her pale eyes flashed with anger. "You have been ignoring our prohibitions."

Suian spun around to face the newcomer. "Who are you?"

Amys gave the former Amyrlin a brief glance, unimpressed. She returned those hard eyes to Nynaeve's. "You are as foolish as Rand al'Thor. And as stubborn. He asks that I tell Elayne Trakand to meet with him at the usual place and time tonight. I tell you instead. Be gone from this place, as I am."

And with no more than that, she was, indeed, gone, leaving Nynaeve to wonder what Rand wanted to talk to Elayne about. Siuan snorted at the empty space where she had been. “Obnoxious woman. One of those Aiel Wise Ones you told me about? Was that what got your underwear in a bunch? Worried she would catch you disobeying?”

Nynaeve glared. “And what has you so jittery you can’t hold your dress still? Maybe it’s something I heard last night? I heard you heaved Gareth Bryne’s boots at his head when he told you to sit down and polish them properly—he still doesn’t know Min does the polishing, does he?—so he turned you upside down and—”

Siuan’s full-armed slap rung her ears. For an instant she could only stare at the other woman, eyes going wider and wider. With a wordless shriek, she tried to punch Siuan in the eye. Tried, because somehow Siuan had tangled a fist in her hair. A moment later they were down in the dirt of the street, rolling about and screaming, flailing wildly.

Grunting, Nynaeve thought she was getting the better of it even if she did not know whether she was on the top or the bottom half the time. Siuan was trying to yank her braid out by the roots with one hand while the other pounded at her ribs or anything else it could find, but she had the other woman the same way, and Siuan’s yanking and punching were definitely growing weaker, and she herself was going to pound Siuan senseless in another minute, then snatch her bald. Nynaeve yelped as a toe caught her hard on the shin. The woman kicked! Nynaeve tried to knee her, but it was not easy in skirts. Kicking was not fighting fair!

Suddenly Nynaeve realized that Siuan was shaking. At first she thought the woman was crying. Then she realized it was laughter. Pushing herself up, she brushed strands of hair out of her face—her braid was all but undone—and glared down at the other woman. “What are you laughing at? Me? If you are ...!”

“Not at you. At us.” Still quivering with mirth, Siuan shoved Nynaeve off her. Siuan’s hair was in wild disarray, and dust covered the plain wool dress she wore now, worn-looking and neatly darned in several places. She was barefoot, too. “Two grown women, rolling around like ... I haven’t done that since I was ... twelve, I think. I started thinking that all we needed would be fat Cian snatching me up by an ear to tell me girls don’t fight. I heard she once knocked down a drunken printer; I don’t know why.” Something very like giggles took her for a moment, then she quieted them and stood, brushing dust from her clothes. “If we have a disagreement, we can settle it like adult women.” And in a careful tone, “Still, it might be a good idea not to discuss Gareth Bryne.” She gave a start as the worn dress became a gown, red with black-and-gold embroidery around hem and swooping neckline.

Nynaeve sat there staring at her. What would she have done as Wisdom if she found two women rolling around in the dirt that way? If anything, the answer kept her anger at a simmer. Siuan still did not seem to realize that there was no need to brush away dust with your hands in *Tel’aran’rhiod*. Snatching away fingers that had been repairing her braid, Nynaeve got up quickly; before she was on her feet again, her braid hung perfect over her shoulder and her good Theren woollens might have just been laundered.

“I agree,” she said. She would have made any two women she caught like that sorry they had been born even before she hauled them before the Women’s Circle. What was she doing lashing out with her fists like some fool man? Unfortunately—or perhaps fortunately—that thought did nothing for her temper. “If we have disagreements, we can ... discuss them.”

“Which I suppose means we’ll shout at one another,” Siuan said dryly. “Well, better that than the other.”

“We would not have to shout if you—!” Drawing a deep breath, Nynaeve jerked her eyes away; this was no way to begin anew. That breath caught in her throat, and she turned her head back to Siuan so quickly it seemed she had been shaking it. She hoped it did. Just for an instant, there had been a face in a window across the street. A pale, lined, rather normal-looking face beneath a head of dark hair. And there was a flutter in her belly, a bubble of fear, a burn of anger at being afraid. “I think we should go back now,” she said quietly.

“Go back! You said that vile concoction would put me to sleep for a good two hours, and we haven’t been here much more than half that.”

“Time works differently here.” Had it been Moghedien? The face had vanished so quickly it could have been someone dreaming herself here for an instant. If it was Moghedien, they must not—

must not on any account—let her know she had been seen. They had to get away. Bubble of fear, burn of anger. “I told you. A day in *Tel’aran’rhiod* can be an hour in the waking world, or the other way round. We—”

“I’ve dipped better out of the bilge in a bucket, girl. You needn’t think you can get away with shortchanging me. You’ll teach me everything you teach the others, as agreed. We can go when I wake up.”

There was no time. If it had been Moghedien. Suan’s dress was green silk now, and the Amyrlin’s stole and her Great Serpent ring were back, but for a wonder the neckline was almost as low as anything she had worn before. The ring *ter’angreal* hung above her breasts, somehow part of a necklace of square emeralds.

Nynaeve moved without thinking. Her hand lashed out, snatched the necklace so hard it tore free from Suan’s neck. Suan’s eyes widened, but as soon as the clasp broke, she vanished, and necklace and ring melted from Nynaeve’s hand. For an instant she stared at her empty fingers. What happened to someone sent out of *Tel’aran’rhiod* like that? Had she sent Suan back to her sleeping body? Or to somewhere else? To nowhere?

Panic seized her. She was just standing there. Quick as thought she fled, the World of Dreams seeming to change around her.

She stood on a paved street in a town of brick houses, most more than a single story. The White Lion of Andor waved from staffs on the distant walls, and wooden docks stuck out into a broad river where a flock of long-billed birds flapped south low over the water. It all looked vaguely familiar, but it took her a moment to know where she was. Whitebridge. In Andor. And that river was the Arindrelle.

Why had she jumped to Whitebridge? That was simple, and answered as soon as she thought of it. It was somewhere she knew well enough to leap to in *Tel’aran’rhiod* that she could be sure Moghedien did not know. She had passed through once, before Moghedien knew she existed, and she was sure she had never mentioned it, in *Tel’aran’rhiod* or awake.

But that left another question. The same one, in a way. Why Whitebridge? Why not step out of the Dream, wake up in her own bed, such as it was, if washing dishes and scrubbing floors on top of everything had not left her so weary she slept right on? *I can still step out.* Moghedien had seen her in Salidar, if that had been Moghedien. Moghedien knew Salidar now. *I can tell Sheriam.* How? Admit she was teaching Suan? She was not supposed to have her hands on those *ter’angreal* except with Sheriam and the other Aes Sedai. How Suan got hold of them when she wanted, Nynaeve did not know. No, she was not afraid of more hours up to her elbows in hot water. She was afraid of Moghedien. Anger burned in her belly fiercely. She wished she had some goosmint out of her scrip of herbs. *I am so ... so bloody tired of being afraid.*

There was a bench in front of one of the houses, overlooking dock and river. She sat down and considered her situation from every angle. It was ridiculous. The True Source was a pale thing. She channelled a flame dancing in air above her hand. She might look solid—to herself, anyway—but she could see the river through that scrap of fire. She tied it off, and it faded away like mist as soon as the knot was done. How could she face Moghedien when the weakest Novice in Salidar could match or better her strength? That was why she had fled here instead of leaving *Tel’aran’rhiod*. Afraid and angry at being afraid, too angry to think straight, to consider her own weakness.

She would step out of the Dream. Whatever Suan’s scheme had been, it was done; she would have to take her chances right along with Nynaeve. The thought of more hours scrubbing floors tightened her hand on her braid. Days more likely, and maybe Sheriam’s switch besides. They might never let her near one of the dream *ter’angreal* again, or any *ter’angreal*. They would set Faolain over her. A finish to studying Suan and Leane, much less Logain; maybe a finish to studying Healing.

In a fury she channelled another flame. If it was a whit stronger, she could not see it. So much for trying to crank her anger in hope it would help. “There’s nothing for it but to just tell them I saw Moghedien,” she muttered, yanking her braid hard enough to hurt. “Light, they *will* give me to Faolain. I’d almost rather die!”

“But you seem to enjoy running little errands for her.”

That mocking voice pulled Nynaeve up off the bench like hands on her shoulders. Moghedien stood in the street all in black, shaking her head at what she saw. With all her strength Nynaeve wove a shield of Spirit and hurled it between the other woman and *saidar*. Tried to hurl it between; it was

like chopping at a tree with a paper hatchet. Moghedien actually smiled before she bothered to slice Nynaeve's weave, and that as casually as brushing a bite away from her face. Nynaeve stared at her as though poleaxed. After everything it came down to this. The One Power, useless. All the anger bubbling inside her, useless. All her plans, her hopes, useless. Moghedien did not bother to strike back. She did not even bother to channel a shield of her own. That was how much contempt she had.

"I was afraid you had seen me. I grew careless when you and Siuan started trying to kill each other. With your hands." Moghedien gave a belittling laugh. She was weaving something, lazily because there was no reason to hurry. Nynaeve did not know what it was, yet she wanted to scream. Fury seethed inside her, but fear dulled her wits, rooted her feet to the ground. "Sometimes I think you are all too ignorant even to train, you and the former *Amyrlin Seat* and all the rest. But I cannot allow you to betray me." That weave was reaching out for her. "It is time to collect you at last, it seems."

"Hold, Moghedien!" Birgitte shouted.

Nynaeve's mouth dropped open. It *was* Birgitte, as she had been, in her short white coat and wide yellow trousers, intricate golden braid pulled over her shoulder, silver arrow drawn on silver bow. It was impossible. Birgitte was no longer part of *Tel'aran'rhiod*, she was back in Salidar, making sure no-one discovered Nynaeve and Siuan asleep with the sun up and began asking questions.

Moghedien was so shocked, the flows she had woven vanished. Shock lasted less than a moment, though. The gleaming arrow flew from Birgitte's bow—and evaporated. The bow evaporated. Something seemed to seize the archer, jerking her arms straight up, pulling her clear of the ground. Almost immediately she was snubbed short, pulled tight between wrists and ankles a foot above the ground.

"I should have considered the possibility of you." Moghedien turned her back on Nynaeve to move closer to Birgitte. "Do you enjoy your flesh? Without Gaidal Cain?"

Nynaeve thought of channelling. But what? A dagger that might not even penetrate the woman's skin? Fire that would not singe her skirts? Moghedien knew how useless she was; she was not even looking at her. If she stopped the flow of Spirit to the sleeping woman in amber, she would wake in Salidar, she could give warning. Her face twisted near to tears as she looked at Birgitte. The golden-haired woman hung there, staring defiantly at Moghedien. Moghedien contemplated her in return as a woodcarver would a block of wood.

There's only me, Nynaeve thought. *I might as well not be able to channel at all. There's only me.*

Lifting that first foot was like pulling it out of knee-deep mud, the second staggering step no easier. Toward Moghedien. "Don't hurt me," Nynaeve cried. "Please. Don't hurt me." A chill ran through her. Birgitte was gone. A child of perhaps three or four, in short white coat and wide yellow trousers, stood there playing with a toy-sized silver bow. Flipping her golden braid back, the child aimed the bow at Nynaeve and giggled, then stuck a finger in her mouth as though unsure whether she had done something wrong. Nynaeve sagged to her knees. It was hard work crawling in skirts, but she did not think she could have remained standing. Somehow she managed, reaching out a pleading hand and whimpering. "Please. Don't hurt me. Please. Don't hurt me." Over and over as she dragged toward the Forsaken, a broken beetle scrabbling in the dirt.

Moghedien watched silently, until at last she said, "Once I thought you were stronger than this. Now I find I truly like the sight of you on your knees. That is close enough, girl. Not that I think you have courage enough to try tearing *my* hair out ..." She seemed amused by the notion.

Nynaeve's hand wavered a span from Moghedien. It had to be close enough. There was only her. And *Tel'aran'rhiod*. The image formed in her head, and there it was, silver bracelet on her outstretched wrist, silver leash linking it to the silver collar around Moghedien's neck. It was not just the *a'dam* she fixed in her head, but Moghedien wearing it, Moghedien and the *a'dam*, a part of *Tel'aran'rhiod* that she held in the form she wanted. She knew something of what to expect; she had worn an *a'dam*'s bracelet briefly once, in Falme. In a strange way she was aware of Moghedien in the same way she was aware of her own body, her own emotions, two sets, each distinct, but each in her own head. One thing she had only hoped, because Elayne insisted it was so. The thing was indeed a link; she could feel the Source through the other woman.

Moghedien's hand leaped to the collar, shock rounding her eyes. Rage and horror. Rage more than horror, at first. Nynaeve felt them almost as if they were her own. Moghedien had to know what the leash-and-collar was, yet she tried to channel anyway; at the same time Nynaeve felt a slight

shifting in herself, in the *a'dam*, as the other woman tried to bend *Tel'aran'rhiod* to herself. Suppressing Moghedien's attempt was simple; the *a'dam* was a link, with her in control. Knowing that made it easy. Nynaeve did not want to channel those flows, so they were not channelled. Moghedien might as well have tried to pick up a mountain with her bare hands. Horror overwhelmed rage.

Getting to her feet, Nynaeve fastened the proper image in her mind. She did not just imagine Moghedien leashed in the *a'dam*, she knew Moghedien was leashed, as firmly as she knew her own name. The sense of shifting, of her skin trying to crawl, did not go away, though. "Stop that," she said sharply. The *a'dam* did not move, but it seemed to tremble unseen. She thought of blackwasp nettles lightly brushing the other woman from shoulders to knees. Moghedien shuddered, exhaled convulsively. "Stop it, I said, or I'll do worse." The shifting ceased. Moghedien watched her warily still clutching the silver collar around her neck and with an air of being poised on her toes for flight.

Birgitte—the child who was, or had been, Birgitte—stood eyeing them curiously. Nynaeve formed the image of her as a grown woman, concentrated. The little girl put her finger back in her mouth and began studying the toy bow. Nynaeve breathed angrily. It was hard changing what someone else was already maintaining. And on top of that, Moghedien had claimed she could make changes permanent. But what she could do, she could undo. "Restore her."

"If you release me, I—"

Nynaeve thought of nettles again, and not a light brush this time. Moghedien sucked air through clenched teeth, shook like a bedsheet in a high wind.

"That," Birgitte said, "was the most frightening thing that has ever happened to me." Herself once more, she wore the short coat and wide trousers, but she had no bow or quiver. "I *was* a child, but at the same time, what was me—really me—was just some fancy floating in the back of that child's mind. And I knew it. I knew I was just going to watch what happened and play ..." Flipping her golden braid back over her shoulder, she gave Moghedien a hard look.

"How did you get here?" Nynaeve asked. "I am grateful, you understand, but ... how?"

Birgitte gave Moghedien a final stony stare, then opened her coat to fish in the neck of her blouse, pulling up the twisted stone ring on a leather thong. "Siu'an woke up. Just for a moment, and not all the way. Long enough to grumble about you snatching this from her. When you didn't wake right behind her, I knew something must be wrong, so I took the ring and the last of what you mixed for Siuan."

"There was hardly any left. Only the dregs."

"Enough to put me to sleep. It tastes horrible, by the way. After that, it was as easy as finding feather-dancers in Shiotia. In some ways this is almost as if I were still—" Birgitte cut off with another glare for Moghedien. The silver bow reappeared in her hand, and a quiver of silver arrows at her hip, yet after one moment they vanished again. "Past is past, and the future is ahead," she said firmly. "I was not truly surprised to realize there were two of you who knew they were in *Tel'aran'rhiod*. I knew the other must be her, and when I arrived and saw the pair of you ... It seemed as if she had already captured you, but I hoped that if I distracted her, you might come up with something."

Nynaeve felt a stab of shame. She had considered abandoning Birgitte. That was what she had almost come up with. The thought had only been there for a moment, rejected as soon as it came, but it had come. What a coward she was. Surely Birgitte never even had moments when fear almost took control of her. "I ..." A faint taste of boiled catfern and powdered mavinsleaf. "I almost ran away," she said faintly. "I was so frightened my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. I almost ran away and left you."

"Oh?" Nynaeve writhed inside as Birgitte considered her. "But you did not, did you? I should have loosed before I called out, but I've never felt comfortable shooting anyone from behind. Even her. Still, it all worked out. But what do we do with her now?"

Moghedien certainly seemed to have overcome her fear. Ignoring the silver collar around her throat, she watched Nynaeve and Birgitte as though they were the prisoners, not she, and she was deliberating what to do with them. Except for an occasional twitch of her hands, as if she wanted to scratch where her skin held the memory of nettles, she appeared black-clad serenity. Only the *a'dam* let Nynaeve know there was fear in the woman, almost a gibbering, but pushed down to a muted buzz. She wished the thing let her know what Moghedien was thinking as well as feeling. Then again, she was just as glad not to be inside the mind behind those cold dark eyes.

"Before you consider anything ... drastic," Moghedien said, "remember that I know much that would be useful to you. I have observed the other Chosen, peeked into their schemes. Is that not worth something?"

"Tell me, and I will consider whether it's worth anything," Nynaeve said. What could she do with the woman?

"Lanfear, Graendal, Balthamel, Rahvin and Sammael are plotting together."

Nynaeve gave the leash a short tug, staggering her. "I know that. Tell me something new." The woman was captive here, but the *a'dam* only existed so long as they were in *Tel'aran'rhiod*.

"Do you know they are drawing Rand al'Thor to attack Sammael? But when he does, he will find the others as well, waiting to trap him between them. At least, he will find some. I think Lanfear plays another game, one the others know nothing about. That is," Moghedien murmured, "if he lives long enough to find them."

Nynaeve took hold of the silvery leash where it joined the collar and pulled the Forsaken's face close to hers. Dark eyes met her gaze flatly, but she could feel anger through the *a'dam*, and fear wriggling up and being stamped down. "You listen to me. Do you think I don't know why you are pretending to be so cooperative? You think if you keep talking long enough, I will make some slip, and you can escape. You think the longer we talk, the harder I'll find it to kill you." That much was true enough. To kill somebody in cold blood, even one of the Forsaken, would be hard, maybe harder than she could manage. What was she going to do with the woman? "But you understand this. I won't allow hinting at things. If you try keeping anything back from me, I will do to you everything you ever thought of doing to me." Dread, creeping through the leash, like bone-chilling shrieks deep in Moghedien's mind. Maybe she did not know as much about *a'dam* as Nynaeve thought. Maybe she believed Nynaeve could read her thoughts if she tried. "Now if you know of some threat to Rand something ahead of Sammael and the others, you tell me. Now!"

Words spilled from Moghedien's mouth, and her tongue flickered out to wet her lips continually. "Al'Thor means to go after Rahvin. Today. Because he thinks Rahvin killed Morgase. I don't know whether he did or not, but al'Thor believes it. But Rahvin never trusted Lanfear. He never trusted any of them. Why should he? He thought it all might be some trap set for him, so he has laid a trap of his own. He has set Wards through Caemlyn so if a man channels a spark he will know. Al'Thor will walk right into it. He almost certainly already has. I think he meant to leave Cairhien right after sunrise. I had no part of it. It was none of it my doing. I—"

Nynaeve wanted to shut her up; the fear sweat glistening on the woman's face made her sick, but if she had to listen to that pleading voice, too ... She started to channel, wondering whether she would be strong enough to hold Moghedien's tongue, then smiled. She was linked to Moghedien, and in control. Moghedien's eyes bulged as she wove flows to stop her own mouth and tied them. Nynaeve added plugs for her ears, too, before turning to Birgitte. "What do you think?"

"Elayne's heart will break. She loves her mother."

"I know that!" Nynaeve took a breath. "I will cry with her and mean every tear, but right now I must worry about Rand. I think she was telling the truth. I could almost feel it." She caught the silver leash just below her bracelet and shook it. "Maybe it's this, and maybe it was imagination. It would explain why Rand wanted to meet Elayne tonight. What do you believe?"

"That it's the truth. She was never very brave unless she clearly had the upper hand, or thought she could get it. And you certainly put the fear of the Light into her."

Nynaeve grimaced. Birgitte's every word put another bubble of anger in her belly. She was never very brave except when she clearly had the upper hand. That could describe herself. She had put the fear of the Light into Moghedien. She had, and she had meant every word when she said it. Boxing somebody's ears when they needed it was one thing; threatening torture, wanting to torture, even Moghedien, was something else again. And here she was trying to avoid what she knew she had to do. Never very brave except when she clearly had the upper hand. This time the bubble of anger was seeded by herself. "We have to go to Caemlyn. I do, at least. With her. I may not be able to channel strongly enough to tear paper as I am, but with the *a'dam* I can use her strength."

"You won't be able to affect anything in the waking world from *Tel'aran'rhiod*," Birgitte said quietly.

"I know! I know, but I have to do something."

Birgitte threw back her head and laughed. "Oh, Nynaeve, it is such an embarrassment being associated with such a coward as you." Her laughter trailed off. "Rand wants to meet Elayne, you say? Why would he arrange that and a battle on the same day? Lews Therin knows war better than that." Abruptly her eyes widened in surprise. "There wasn't much of your potion left. I think I am wak—" In mid-word, she was simply no longer there.

Nynaeve chewed her lip as she stared at the place Birgitte had been. Why *would* Rand arrange a meeting if he meant to run off and flex his chest hair at Rahvin? Not that he had any chest hair. Brain hair. Even bald men had brain hair. Not that Rand was bald. She seized her braid, removed the blocks from Moghedien's tongue and ears, and glared at her. "Are you trying to trick me? Rand wouldn't go to Caemlyn like that!"

The Forsaken wet her lips. "He planned to do so. I know it! Rahvin has plans, too. Are they why you came here? Do you seek the hidden cache of *angreal* and *ter'angreal* in this place as well?"

"All I sought was to be far away from you," Nynaeve said grimly. It hadn't been possible, though. She'd chased them all the way from Tanchico. Tried to kill her. *Succeeded* in killing Ronelle and Katsui. Ripped Birgitte out of *Tel'aran'rhiod*. And those were only the crimes she knew of! The woman deserved anything that happened to her!

"Sheriam and the others are planning to choose a rebel Amyrlin Seat of their own, someone they can control. Have you considered the possibilities? I know much that can be useful to you, you see," Moghedien babbled. Her fear oozed from the *a'dam*.

How did she know of Sheriam? Had she stalked them all the way to Salidar? Nynaeve's own fear oozed back along that forced link. She could have been watching from the shadows for days, waiting to strike. If they'd had a real *a'dam* ... if she could have gotten it around Moghedien's neck in the real world as she had here ... She really did know much that could be useful to them, about the One Power not least of all. But they didn't have an *a'dam*; all they had were regrets and the need to prevent any future ones.

She could do it. She *should*. But she was a healer, not a killer. She didn't think she had what it took, and wished Birgitte would come back so she could pass the responsibility over to her. *I am tired of being such a coward*. Nynaeve wanted a bath, and it had nothing to do with the heat. "What's left? To talk about the weather?" she said bitterly.

"You know more about controlling weather than I do," Moghedien said with mounting panic, and an echo slid through the bracelet. "All I know is that what is happening is the Great—the Dark One's work." She had the nerve to smile ingratiatingly at the slip. "No mere human is strong enough to change that."

"A lot of things change," Nynaeve said wearily. She used Moghedien's own power to weave a blade of Air, almost transparent in her hand. They both stared at it in horror.

"Wait! Don't kill me, please! Please! I will serve you! Or I will go somewhere far away! You will never see me again, I swear it! On the G—, on the, on the Light I swear it! I repent! I reject the Shadow. Just let me live!" All that she had been was gone from Moghedien, all that poise and arrogance. She begged and begged, and with the *a'dam* linking them Nynaeve knew it was no act. The woman's terror whipped at her along the silvery lead.

It was all lies, of course. As soon as Nynaeve left, she would go back on it all, and start looking for another chance to shoot her in the back. The blade was made of air but felt as heavy as stone in Nynaeve's hand.

"No!" Moghedien screamed. She thrashed against the bonds that held her in place. "Monforex, save me! Defend your mistress!" There was no-one there but the two of them, however. Nothing to save her, other than the horrified roiling of Nynaeve's stomach.

Nynaeve stepped up. She put her hand on the Forsaken's sturdy shoulder, and she thrust the knife through her breast and into her heart. Moghedien's screams stopped in a low gasp. Nynaeve felt her shock, her pain, her silent wail of realisation. She felt her die, almost as though she died right there with her. The person she had been, at least. The person she had liked being.

Blood did not show very well on that black dress, but it did when it trickled from Moghedien's slack mouth. Bonds and knife disappeared the moment she began to fall. She didn't last long enough to hit the ground, but winked out of *Tel'aran'rhiod*. And out of existence, if the Wise One's warnings had been true.

Nynaeve stood alone, hugging herself against the sudden cold.

CHAPTER 27: *A Vengeance Delayed*



The cottage Elayne had been assigned to in Salidar was intolerably small. One simply could not pace properly in it, no matter how furious. Min leant against one wall in her loose white shirt, watching worriedly. She had not seen anything in her viewings, or she would have told her. There was no reason to think it true. It was just some horrible rumour! It had to be.

Nynaeve sat on one of the rickety stools near the fireplace, looking subdued despite the heroic tale she'd related to them. Siuan sat with her, fingers steepled and a frown of concentration on her youthful face. Comforting the other woman—or Elayne—was the last thing on her mind.

"This changes much. With your mother dead—" the former Amyrlin began.

"I don't believe that!" Elayne snapped.

"You didn't believe the rumour that Rand had killed her," Siuan went on relentlessly, "and that's a different thing. I didn't, either. A report from a Forsaken is more credible than rumour, however. Her real killer is probably trying to use him as a convenient scapegoat. It makes sense. If Morgase were alive, she would come forward and acknowledge him the Dragon Reborn. Or, if she believed him a false Dragon in spite of the proof, she'd be organizing resistance. None of my eyes-and-ears have heard a whisper of either."

"They *have*," Elayne forced in. "There's rebellion in the east."

"Against Morgase. Against. If it's not a rumour, too." Siuan's voice was flat as a planed board. "Your mother is dead, girl. Best to admit as much and get your weeping done."

Elayne's chin rose. "You complain continually over how long it is taking to get in touch with all of your agents," she said coolly, "but I will set aside whether you can have heard all there is to hear. Whether my mother is alive or not, *my* place is in Caemlyn, now. I *am* Daughter-Heir."

Siuan's loud snort made Nynaeve jump. "You've been Accepted long enough to know better. You have as much potential as had been seen in a thousand years. Not as much as Nynaeve, but still enough to make any Aes Sedai's eyes light up."

Elayne's nose wrinkled—she knew very well that if she had already been on the Lion Throne, the Aes Sedai still would have gotten her away for training, by asking if possible, by stuffing her into a barrel if necessary—and she opened her mouth, but Siuan did not even slow down.

"True, they'd not mind you taking the throne sooner than later; there hasn't been a Queen who was openly Aes Sedai in far too long. But they won't let you go until you're a full sister, and even then they will keep a very close eye on you."

"So they expect me to sit and do nothing while a *man* claims the Lion Throne?" It was incredulous. The thought of it happening, and the thought of not acting against it both.

Siuan's smile was sharp. "They *expect* you to try to do otherwise." And will be watching, ready to interfere if or when she did. The former Amyrlin nodded knowingly and rose from her stool. She stuffed the dreamwalking *ter'angreal* into her pouch and made for the door. "They also expect these to be elsewhere. Best I go show them what they need to see."

Elayne waited only a few heartbeats after the door had closed behind her before addressing Min. "Could you go to Keestis and ask her for a loan of that item, please?"

"Of course. I'll be right back," Min said. She touched Elayne's shoulder comfortingly as she passed. It couldn't be true.

"It *was* just rumour, wasn't it?" she asked Nynaeve once they were alone.

"Moghedien said she didn't know if it was true, only that Rand believed it," she said flatly. "She seemed pretty certain that Rahvin was in Caemlyn, though."

A Forsaken in Caemlyn. Reason enough to shudder. A Forsaken so close to her mother ... Elayne sat on the vacated stool and pressed her fingers to her lips. It had to be a lie. Perhaps Rand would know more. She would see him soon, prohibitions be damned.

It was no surprise to her when the door opened to reveal her Warder Birgitte, who strode in with her strung bow in hand and a quiver hanging from her belt. She set the bow in a corner right away,

however, and started freeing the quiver as she spoke. "They found a dead woman in town today." Nynaeve raised her head. "A humble washerwoman named Maigan. It was all the talk at the cookfire. Seems she died of a heart attack in her sleep, though she had not a single grey hair. Surprising enough, but there was even more scandal to whisper of. Turned out this Maigan was a bit of a thief, they said. When Joyce Sedai came to examine the body, she found a number of *ter'angreal* on her. None dared suggest an Aes Sedai had killed her for taking them, but ..."

"Not an Aes Sedai," Nynaeve said in a tight voice. "Me. I killed her."

"A fate she richly deserved. And don't you dare feel bad about giving it to her," Birgitte said.

"I don't," Nynaeve insisted. Then more quietly. "I don't."

Birgitte looked from her to Elayne and back, then sighed. "A lot of that going on today. Why don't you finish mixing your sleeping draught? It's nearly time."

"Don't tell me what to do," Nynaeve muttered, though she went to the corner of the room that they had optimistically called a kitchen even so.

The clacking and grinding had long since finished by the time the door opened again and Min slipped in out of the dark street. She latched the door behind her, and drew the ragged curtains on their almost opaque windows before showing Elayne the stone ring she'd hid in her pocket.

"Will you tell him I miss him?" she asked quietly as she handed it over.

Elayne looked into those huge, beautiful eyes. She knew she could have refused, or lied and then told him nothing. She also knew Min would have told him if their places were reversed. She sighed softly. "I will," she promised.

Nynaeve's concoction tasted a little of honey, somewhat to her surprise. She drank the lot and settled herself on her narrow, lumpy bed while the three of them stood over her. A rather discomfiting way to go to sleep, it occurred, though one that had become all too familiar now.

Elayne fell asleep to the feel of eyes on her, and woke to the same, though these ones were no friends of hers, assuming they even existed. She was wearing a red and white gown with Andoran accoutrements, and had no intention of changing it in any way. The cottage in Salidar was empty, as was the town outside. Lights shone in some of the windows but she didn't bother investigating. It was *Tel'aran'rhiod*, she knew how things worked here by now.

Caemlyn lay to the north and Elayne was sorely tempted to will herself there and investigate these ugly rumours herself. But Rahvin's presence was seemingly not a rumour. Nynaeve had been able to best a Forsaken here, but Elayne was not certain she could replicate the feat. She willed herself to the very familiar Heart of the Stone in Tear instead.

A surprisingly large crowd was already waiting for her, most of whom she did not recognise. The nearly uniform dark shirts, white blouses, bracelets and necklaces identified the strangers as Aiel Wise Ones. Her gaze fastened on the lone man in the group, standing with his arms folded in a red Andoran coat, solemnly watching *Callandor* glitter from the marble floor he had once driven it into. She knew the brown-furred almost human figure squatting not far from him as well, and a few of the Wise Ones, but she didn't see Dani at all.

"Daniele is well, I hope," she said by way of greeting.

"She will be," the sun-haired Melaine said determinedly.

Rand had spun around at the sound of her voice. As was often the case, he didn't look quite himself here, his face looking older and blunter than it was in real life. Even on that not quite right face, his pain showed plainly. "Elayne. I'm sorry, I didn't want to do this in public but they insisted on an escort."

"If it is Moghedien you are worried about, then worry no more. Nynaeve has defeated and killed her." Raine gasped and even the Wise Ones looked surprised.

"Are you certain of this?" Amys asked.

"She was killed in the dream, and her body found in Salidar, to which she had stalked us."

Amys nodded solemnly. "Her honour is great. And the dream is a safer place for it. With Moghedien and Lanfear gone we can move freely once again."

It was Elayne's turn to gasp. "Lanfear is dead?"

Rand flinched as though struck. What was known of Lews Therin Telamon's history with that woman flashed through her mind, but her alarm was misplaced. "Not without price. Moiraine ... she sacrificed herself to stop her."

Moiraine. They had not been close, despite being related, but she found herself blinking back tears. "I shall have to tell Siuan."

"Siuan Sanche? She's alive?" Rand asked, frowning.

She nodded. "Stilled, but alive and in Salidar."

To the floor went his frown, along with his gaze. "She died thinking otherwise."

"Such rumours are often mistaken," Elayne said firmly. "So if you are going to share some about my mother, kindly do not bother."

He looked at her, and she hated the pity she saw in his eyes. "Elayne ... Rahvin is in Caemlyn. He goes by the name Gaebriel but it's him. He's the lord Mat said sent an assassin after you. The one ..."

Her mother's lover. She flushed just to think of it, her flesh crawling as though it was her being groped. "That does not mean she's dead!" He came to stand over her, and rested his hand lightly on her shoulder. The urge to rest her head against his chest and weep took her by surprise. She shook it off. "Min says she misses you."

He snatched his hand away from her guiltily. "Min?"

"You recall her, I trust?" she said, brow arched coolly. "She went to Emond's Field with you." His blushes were entirely warranted. "Min is a better woman than I am."

"Too good," Rand mumbled. "You both are." He straightened his back, face solemn. "I will kill him for you. The Lion Throne is yours, not his."

"My mother's," she corrected firmly. "And she would not like you marching an army through Andor."

"I don't need to march it. I can get there ... another way."

"The Ways? That would be an unacceptable risk even if the army was invited, which it isn't. No, Rand. This won't do. You cannot run off and attack Rahvin, not in a place he has fortified. And definitely not without me."

"But ... your mother. If she is alive, then ..." he said slowly.

A girl dreamed of rescue, but a woman spoke. "You are the Dragon Reborn. Any risks you take must be considered with upmost care, and limited as much as possible. My mother would have—my mother *knows* that! No. I forbid this attack upon Andor. For now, at least. When I return to you, we will plan for Rahvin's destruction, and deliver it to him, together."

He must have been more worried about the Forsaken than his pride would admit, for he sighed deeply. "When will you return?"

The words were professionally spoken, but the intimacy in his eyes made them otherwise. "As soon as I can," she said, calmly, maturely, her heart skipping. "I must free myself from Salidar first. And it will be a long journey to Cairhien, but—"

"I could pick you up," he said with flattering haste. "Shorten the trip to ... maybe a day or less."

He looked serious but she could not see how he could make good on that boast. There were no Waygates or Portal Stones near Salidar. "I should like it if that were so." She would just have to trust that he could do as he said. "Give me time to prepare. At our next weekly meeting, we can make our arrangements."

"Very well. I will call off the attack until you arrive," Rand, the Dragon Reborn, said.

It filled Elayne with pride to turn him to the path of wisdom in that way. She raised her chin, and wished the watchers were not there so they might kiss. "When I do, we will settle for Rahvin. And avenge all that needs avenging. Together."

Where once only women could rule, now stood a man. The threat did ring loudly in the ears of tradition, as loud as did the inspiration echo in rebel hearts. The Wheel began to turn, and all rushed to push it, both forward and back.

—from *The Wheel of Time* by Sulamein so Bhagad, Chief Historian at the Court of the Sun

The End
of the Eighth Book of
The Wheel Turns Anew