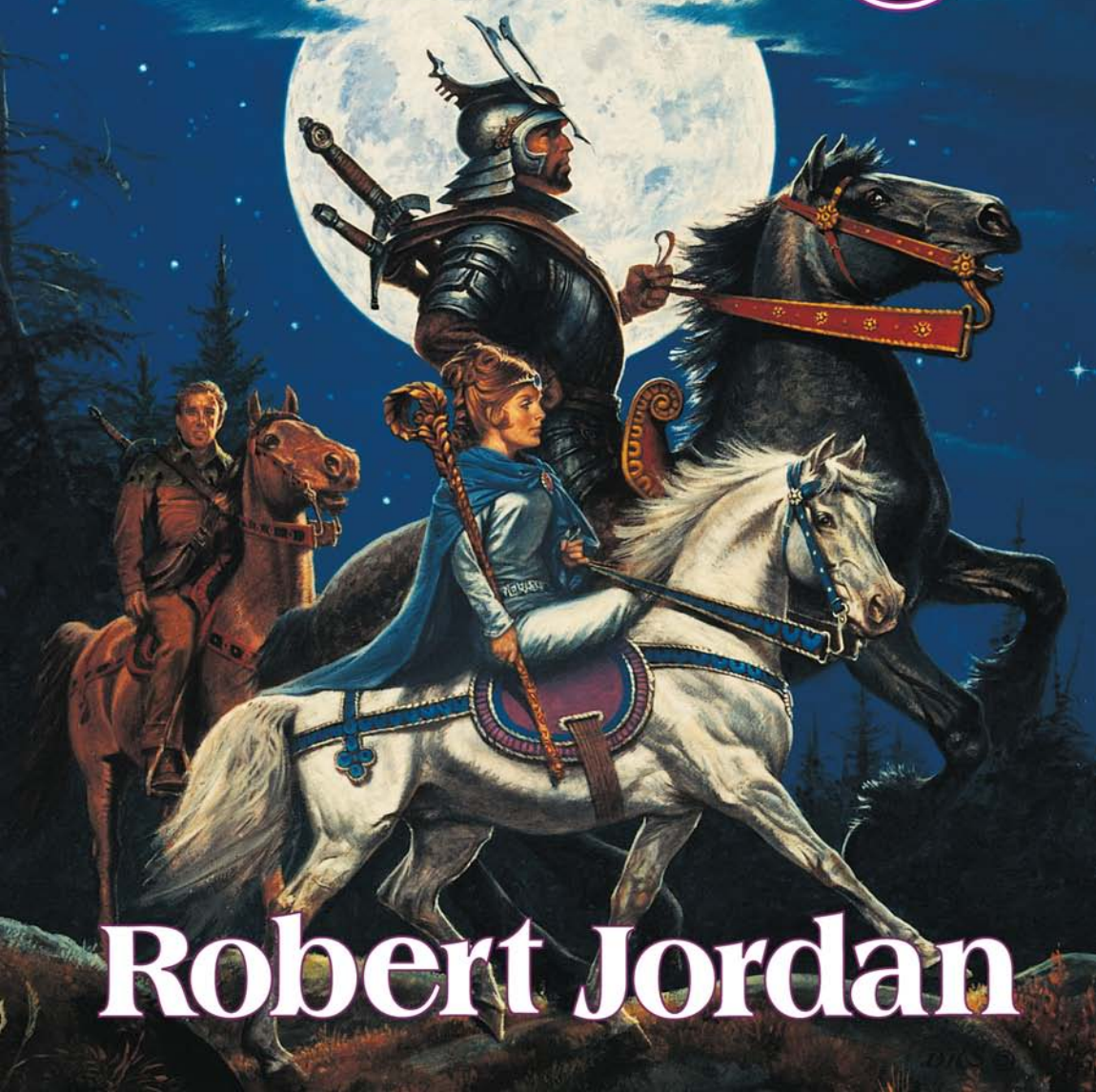


The First Part of Book One of

# THE WHEEL OF TIME

#1  
New York  
Times  
Bestselling  
Series



# Robert Jordan



"*The Eye of the World* is the best of its genre."

—*The Ottawa Citizen*

"A splendid tale of heroic fantasy, vast in scope, colorful in detail, and convincing in its presentation of human character and personality."

—L. Sprague De Camp

"This richly detailed fantasy presents fully realized, complex adventure. Recommended."

—*Library Journal*

"This one is as solid as a steel blade and glowing with the true magic. Robert Jordan deserves congratulations."

—Fred Saberhagen

"One hell of a story. [It] kept me up past my bedtime for three nights running—and it's been a long time since a novel's done *that*."

—Baird Searles,

*Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*

"A future collector's item. Jordan has brought out a completely new allegory in a fantasy concept that goes even beyond this massive story, working with an artist's eye and the sense of responsibility of a serious historian."

—Gordon R. Dickson

"Classic oppositions are brought into play: initiates versus innocents, good versus evil, the spiritual power of women versus that of men. The travelers themselves are full of subtleties and shadows—ordinary villagers who, thrust into cosmic conflict, are unable to abandon their simple human desires and fears.

"This intricate allegorical fantasy recalls the works of Tolkien because of its intensity and warmth."

—*Publishers Weekly*

"Robert Jordan has come to dominate the world Tolkien began to reveal."

—*The New York Times*

“This has magic and pacing and detail and human involvement, with a certain subtlety of presentation and a grand central vision. Robert Jordan . . . is a lot of writer!”

—Piers Anthony

“An exciting story; the reader is drawn in early and kept there until the last page. There is adventure and mystery and dark things that move in the night—a combination of Robin Hood and Stephen King that is hard to resist. . . . Jordan makes the reader care about these characters as though they were old friends; so much so that the reader will put down the book regretting the wait for the next title in the series.”

—*Milwaukee Sentinel*

“A classic fantasy tale of the struggle between light and darkness, good and evil, death and life. Goodness, life, and light are always in retreat, always about to be defeated, but never quite! Don’t miss it!”

—Andrew M. Greeley

“Certainly a title I want to add to my permanent collection and I shall be eagerly awaiting the sequel which is promised at the end.”

—Andre Norton

# THE EYE OF THE WORLD

ROBERT JORDAN



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK  
NEW YORK

The author and publisher have provided this e-book to you without Digital Rights Management software (DRM) applied so that you can enjoy reading it on your personal devices. This e-book is for your personal use only. You may not print or post this e-book, or make this e-book publicly available in any way. You may not copy, reproduce or upload this e-book, other than to read it on one of your personal devices.

**Copyright infringement is against the law. If you believe the copy of this e-book you are reading infringes on the author's copyright, please notify the publisher at: [us.macmillanusa.com/piracy](http://us.macmillanusa.com/piracy).**

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

## THE EYE OF THE WORLD

Copyright © 1990 by Robert Jordan

The phrases “The Wheel of Time®” and “The Dragon Reborn™,” and the snake-wheel symbol, are trademarks of Robert Jordan.

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book, or portions thereof, in any form.

Cover for this edition by Darrell K. Sweet

Maps by Ellisa Mitchell

Interior illustrations by Matthew C. Nielsen

A Tor Book

Published by Tom Doherty Associates, LLC

175 Fifth Avenue

New York, NY 10010

[www.tor-forge.com](http://www.tor-forge.com)

Tor® is a registered trademark of Tom Doherty Associates, LLC.

ISBN 978-1-4299-5981-0

First edition: February 1990

First E-book Edition: October 2009

Manufactured in the United States of America

To Harriet  
Heart of my heart,  
Light of my life,  
Forever.



This page intentionally left blank.

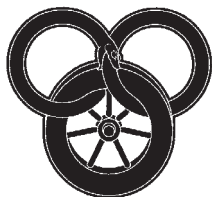
# C O N T E N T S

	PROLOGUE Dragonmount . . . . .	11
	MAPS . . . . .	18
1	An Empty Road. . . . .	21
2	Strangers . . . . .	37
3	The Peddler. . . . .	49
4	The Gleeman. . . . .	62
5	Winternight . . . . .	76
6	The Westwood. . . . .	92
7	Out of the Woods . . . . .	100
8	A Place of Safety . . . . .	113
9	Tellings of the Wheel . . . . .	127
10	Leavetaking . . . . .	143
11	The Road to Taren Ferry . . . . .	153
12	Across the Taren . . . . .	162
13	Choices . . . . .	175
14	The Stag and Lion . . . . .	192
15	Strangers and Friends. . . . .	206
16	The Wisdom . . . . .	227
17	Watchers and Hunters . . . . .	237
18	The Caemlyn Road . . . . .	253

This page intentionally left blank.

This page intentionally left blank.

# P R O L O G U E



## *Dragonmount*

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

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

her still-open eyes frozen in disbelief. "Where are you, my wife? Where is everyone hiding?"

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

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

Behind him the air rippled, shimmered, solidified into a man who looked around, his mouth twisting briefly with distaste. Not so tall as Lews Therin, he was clothed all in black, save for the snow-white lace at his throat and the silverwork on the turned-down tops of his thigh-high boots. He stepped carefully, handling his cloak fastidiously to avoid brushing the dead. The floor trembled with aftershocks, but his attention was fixed on the man staring into the mirror and laughing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lews Therin frowned down the ruined hall. "Ilyena should be here to offer a guest welcome," he murmured absently, then raised his voice. "Ilyena, where are you?" The floor shook; the golden-haired woman's body shifted as if in answer to his call. His eyes did not see her.

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

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

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

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

he convulsed, thrashing, his skull a sphere of purest agony on the point of bursting. His hoarse screams reverberated through the palace.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

His howl beat at the walls, the howl of a man who had discovered his soul damned by his own hand, and he clawed at his face as if to tear away the sight of what he had done. Everywhere he looked his eyes found the dead. Torn they were, or broken or burned, or half-consumed by stone. Everywhere lay lifeless faces he knew, faces he loved. Old servants and friends of his childhood, faithful companions through the long years of battle. And his children. His own sons and daughters, sprawled like broken dolls, play stilled forever. All slain by his hand. His children's faces accused him, blank eyes asking why, and his tears were no answer. The Betrayer's laughter flogged him, drowned out his howls. He could not bear the faces, the pain. He could not bear to remain any longer. Desperately he reached out to the True Source, to tainted *saidin*, and he Traveled.

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

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

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

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

"Light, forgive me! Ilyena!"

The air turned to fire, the fire to light liquefied. The bolt that struck from the heavens would have seared and blinded any eye that glimpsed it, even for an instant. From the heavens it came, blazed through Lews Therin

Telamon, bored into the bowels of the earth. Stone turned to vapor at its touch. The earth thrashed and quivered like a living thing in agony. Only a heartbeat did the shining bar exist, connecting ground and sky, but even after it vanished the earth yet heaved like the sea in a storm. Molten rock fountained five hundred feet into the air, and the groaning ground rose, thrusting the burning spray ever upward, ever higher. From north and south, from east and west, the wind howled in, snapping trees like twigs, shrieking and blowing as if to aid the growing mountain ever skyward. Ever skyward.

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

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

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



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

(From *Aleth nin Taerin alta Camora*,  
*The Breaking of the World*.  
Author unknown, the Fourth Age)

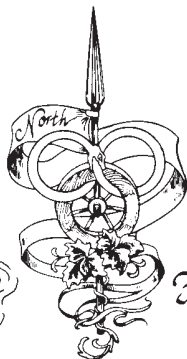
And it came to pass in those days, as it had come before and would come again, that the Dark lay heavy on the land and weighed down the hearts of men, and the green things failed, and hope died. And men cried out to the Creator, saying, O Light of the Heavens, Light of the World, let the Promised One be born of the mountain, according to the prophecies, as he was in ages past and will be in ages to come. Let the Prince of the Morning sing to the land that green things will grow and the valleys give forth lambs. Let the arm of the Lord of the Dawn shelter us from the Dark, and the great sword of justice defend us. Let the Dragon ride again on the winds of time.

(From *Charal Drianaan te Calamon*,  
*The Cycle of the Dragon*.  
Author unknown, the Fourth Age)



Aryth Ocean

Bandar Eban



Falme

Aryth Ocean



Tanchico

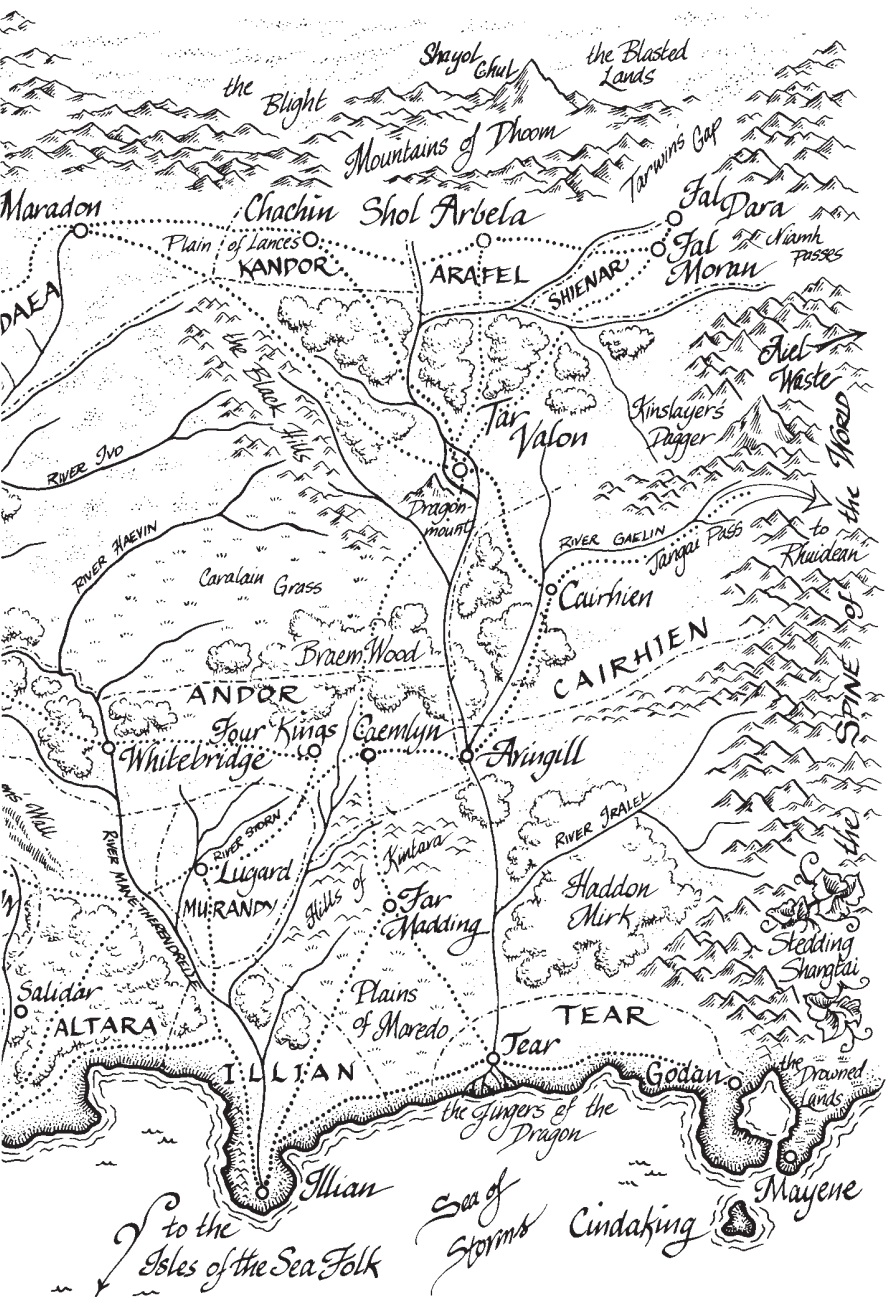


Tremalking

1994  
Eliza  
Mitchell



Qaim



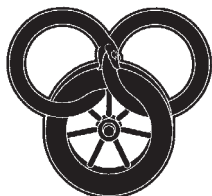




# CHAPTER

# 1

---



## *An Empty Road*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

With a guilty start Rand returned to watching his side of the road, Tam's matter-of-factness reminding him of his task. He was a head taller than his father, taller than anyone else in the district, and had little of Tam



in him physically, except perhaps for a breadth of shoulder. Gray eyes and the reddish tinge to his hair came from his mother, so Tam said. She had been an outlander, and Rand remembered little of her aside from a smiling face, though he did put flowers on her grave every year, at Bel Tine, in the spring, and at Sunday, in the summer.

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

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

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

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

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

Abruptly a stone caught his heel and he stumbled, breaking his eyes away from the dark horseman. His bow dropped to the road, and only an outthrust hand grabbing Bela's harness saved him from falling flat on his

back. With a startled snort the mare stopped, twisting her head to see what had caught her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

remembered. A man who could disappear so suddenly could reappear just as suddenly, maybe even right beside them.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The village lay close onto the Westwood, the forest gradually thinning until the last few trees stood actually among the stout frame houses. The land sloped gently down to the east. Though not without patches of woods, farms and hedge-bordered fields and pastures quilted the land beyond the

village all the way to the Waterwood and its tangle of streams and ponds. The land to the west was just as fertile, and the pastures there lush in most years, but only a handful of farms could be found in the Westwood. Even those few dwindled to none miles short of the Sand Hills, not to mention the Mountains of Mist, which rose above the Westwood treetops, distant but in plain sight from Emond's Field. Some said the land was too rocky, as if there were not rocks everywhere in the Two Rivers, and others said it was hard-luck land. A few muttered that there was no point getting any closer to the mountains than needs be. Whatever the reasons, only the hardest men farmed in the Westwood.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“If you’ll pardon me, Daise,” Tam said. “Wit. The Light shine on you

both." He got Bela moving again, leading her around the scrawny fellow. Daise was concentrating on her husband now, but any minute she could realize whom it was Wit had been talking to.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bel Tine was supposed to come when spring had well and truly arrived, the first lambs born and the first crop up. Even with the cold hanging on, though, no one had any idea of putting it off. Everyone could use a little singing and dancing. And to top everything, if the rumors could be believed, a grand display of fireworks was planned for the Green—if the



first peddler of the year appeared in time, of course. That had been causing considerable talk; it was ten years since the last such display, and that was still talked about.

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The Light protect me from fools. You sitting on the Village Council,

Cenn, and now you're spreading that Coplin talk. Well, you listen to me. We have enough problems without. . . ."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

After a moment Rand said, "Your father would believe you put me up to

it, and mine. . . ." He looked over the cart to where Tam and Bran and Cenn had been talking, and found himself staring his father in the eyes. The Mayor was still lecturing Cenn, who took it now in sullen silence.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rand startled himself by laughing out loud, a laugh of pure relief. The

menacing black-clad rider as a gleeman was a ridiculous notion, but. . . . He clapped a hand over his mouth in embarrassment.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Sometimes I think Nynaeve is right about. . . . Well, that's not important now. You young fellows think for a minute. Everyone's excited about the fireworks, true, and that's only at a rumor. Think how they'll be if the peddler doesn't get here in time, after all their anticipating. And with the weather the way it is, who knows when he will come. They'd be fifty times as excited about a gleeman."

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

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

"None of this is unloading the cart," Tam said briskly, handing the first cask of brandy to the Mayor. "I want a warm fire, my pipe, and a mug of

your good ale." He hoisted the second brandy cask onto his shoulder. "I'm sure Rand will thank you for your help, Matrim. Remember, the sooner the cider is in the cellar. . . ."

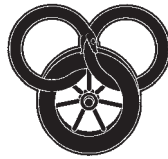
As Tam and Bran disappeared into the inn, Rand looked at his friend. "You don't have to help. Dav won't keep that badger long."

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

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

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

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



# CHAPTER

## 2

---



### *Strangers*

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

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

Worry was not uncommon for the Village Council these days, not in Emond’s Field, and likely not in Watch Hill, or Deven Ride. Or even Taren

Ferry, though who knew what Taren Ferry folk really thought about anything?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Without waiting for a reply she swept on into the common room. Immediately there was the sound of chairs scraping on the floor as the men got to their feet, and exclamings over the smell of the bread. She was eas-



ily the best cook in Emond's Field, and not a man for miles around but eagerly leaped at a chance to put his feet under her table.

"Honeycakes," Mat said, smacking his lips.

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

A lamp hung over the cellar stairs, just beside the kitchen door, and another made a bright pool in the stone-walled room beneath the inn, banishing all but a little dimness in the furthest corners. Wooden racks along the walls and across the floor held casks of brandy and cider, and larger barrels of ale and wine, some with taps driven in. Many of the wine barrels were marked with chalk in Bran al'Vere's hand, giving the year they had been bought, what peddler had brought them, and in which city they had been made, but all of the ale and brandy was the make of Two Rivers farmers or of Bran himself. Peddlers, and even merchants, sometimes brought brandy or ale from outside, but it was never as good and cost the earth, besides, and nobody ever drank it more than once.

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

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

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

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

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

When they went back through the common room, though, there was no need for Mat to hurry. The six men had their chairs in a tight knot before the fireplace. With his back to the fire, Tam was speaking in a low voice, and the others were leaning forward to listen, so intent on his words they would likely not have noticed if a flock of sheep had been driven

through. Rand wanted to move closer, to hear what they were talking about, but Mat plucked at his sleeve and gave him an agonized look. With a sigh he followed Mat out to the cart.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mat continued as if Ewin had not spoken. "Anyway, he defers to her, does what she says. Only he isn't like a hired man. A soldier, maybe. The way he wears his sword, it's part of him, like his hand or his foot. He makes the merchants' guards look like cur dogs. And her, Rand. I never even imagined anyone like her. She's out of a gleeman's story. She's like . . . like. . . ." He paused to give Ewin a sour look. ". . . Like a high-born lady," he finished with a sigh.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Is that all?" Rand said. "You know Nynaeve's temper. When Cenn Buie called her a child last year, she thumped him on the head with her

stick, and he's on the Village Council, and old enough to be her grandfather, besides. She flares up at anything, and never stays angry past turning around."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Pulling his cloak together, Rand stepped forward to support Mat, but words died as the hairs stirred on the back of his neck. He was being watched again. It was far from the feeling the hooded rider had given him, but neither was it pleasant, especially so soon after that encounter.

A quick look about the Green showed him only what he had seen before—children playing, people preparing for Festival, and no one more

than glancing in his direction. The Spring Pole stood alone, now, waiting. Bustle and childish shouts filled the side streets. All was as it should be. Except that he was being watched.

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

"Filthy carrion eater," he muttered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

When he had heard she called Nynaeve child, he had pictured her as old, but she was not. At least, he could not put any age to her at all. At first he thought she was as young as Nynaeve, but the longer he looked the more he thought she was older than that. There was a maturity about her large, dark eyes, a hint of knowing that no one could have gotten young. For an instant he thought those eyes were deep pools about to swallow him up. It was plain why Mat and Ewin named her a lady from a gleeman's tale,

too. She held herself with a grace and air of command that made him feel awkward and stumble-footed. She was barely tall enough to come up to his chest, but her presence was such that her height seemed the proper one, and he felt ungainly in his tallness.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Her smile did fade then, slowly, as if something had been recalled to her. For a moment she merely looked at him. "I am a student of history," she said at last, "a collector of old stories. This place you call the Two Rivers has



always interested me. Sometimes I study the stories of what happened here long ago, here and at other places.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Don’t be a fool.” Mat laughed, but it was a shaky laugh. “Warders are just in stories. Anyway, Warders have swords and armor covered in gold



and jewels, and spend all their time up north, in the Great Blight, fighting evil and Trollocs and such."

"He *could* be a Warder," Ewin insisted.

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

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

"A thousand years of sheep," Mat said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Not unless you want to," Mat said.

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

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

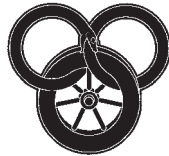
"There's still the gleeman," Rand said, and the younger boy brightened.

"If he ever wakes up," Mat added.

“Rand,” Ewin asked, “*is* there a gleeman?”

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

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



# CHAPTER

## 3

---



### *The Peddler*

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

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

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

In the eyes of the villagers, needles and tea and the like were no more than half the freight in a peddler's wagon. Every bit as important was word of outside, news of the world beyond the Two Rivers. Some peddlers simply

told what they knew, throwing it out in a heap, a pile of rubbish with which they could not be bothered. Others had to have every word dragged out of them, speaking grudgingly, with a bad grace. Fain, however, spoke freely if often teasingly, and spun out the telling, making a show to rival a gleeman. He enjoyed being the center of attention, strutting around like an under-sized rooster, with every eye on him. It occurred to Rand that Fain might not be best pleased to find a real gleeman in Emond's Field.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

At that moment Padan Fain stood up on the wagon seat, and the crowd quieted in an instant. Rand's last words exploded into utter silence, catching

the peddler with an arm raised dramatically and his mouth open. Everybody turned to stare at Rand. The bony little man on the wagon, prepared to have everyone hanging on his first words, gave Rand a sharp, searching look.

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

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

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

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

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

Fain grinned, and Rand had the feeling he was mocking the villagers' isolation from the world, and their ignorance. The peddler leaned forward as if he were about to impart a secret to the Mayor, but his whisper was

meant to carry and did. "The standard of the Dragon has been raised, and men flock to oppose. And to support."

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

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

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

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

"Just as bad as the Dark One!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Cenn's wrinkled face grew darker with every word from Tam and the Mayor, until it was almost purple. "You know what kind of women he's talking about. Stop frowning at me, Luhhan, and you, too, Crawe. This is a decent village of decent folk, and it's bad enough to have Fain here talking about false Dragons using the Power without this Dragon-possessed

fool of a boy bringing Aes Sedai into it. Some things just shouldn't be talked about, and I don't care if you will be letting that fool gleeman tell any kind of tale he wants. It isn't right or decent."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What if he isn't?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

“Go home!”

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

Rand ignored the crowd. He took a seat on the edge of the old stone foundation, gathered his cloak around him, and stared at the inn door. Ghealdan. Tar Valon. The very names were strange and exciting. They were places he knew only from peddlers’ news, and tales told by merchants’ guards. Aes Sedai and wars and false Dragons: those were the stuff of stories told late at night in front of the fireplace, with one candle making strange shapes on the wall and the wind howling against the shutters. On the whole, he believed he would rather have blizzards and wolves. Still, it must be different out there, beyond the Two Rivers, like living in the middle of a gleeman’s tale. An adventure. One long adventure. A whole lifetime of it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Who?" Rand asked.

"Aes Sedai."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Light!" Rand breathed.

Mat's grin broadened. "It was last spring, just before the cutworm got into his fields and nobody else's. Right before everybody in his house came down with yelloweye fever. I heard him do it. He still says he doesn't be-

lieve, but whenever I ask him to name the Dark One now, he throws something at me."

"You are just stupid enough to do that, aren't you, Matrim Cauthon?" Nynaeve al'Meara stepped into their huddle, the dark braid pulled over her shoulder almost bristling with anger. Rand scrambled to his feet. Slender and barely taller than Mat's shoulder, at the moment the Wisdom seemed taller than any of them, and it did not matter that she was young and pretty. "I suspected something of the sort about Bili Congar at the time, but I thought you at least had more sense than to try taunting him into such a thing. You may be old enough to be married, Matrim Cauthon, but in truth you shouldn't be off your mother's apron strings. The next thing, you'll be naming the Dark One yourself."

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

"Watch your tongue, Matrim!"

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

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

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

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

the words go where he wanted. Perhaps he could get away as soon as Nynaeve finished. But he knew he would not, even if he did not understand why.

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

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

"Well, Rand?" Nynaeve said.

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

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

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

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

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

"Will you dance with me tomorrow?" That was not what he had meant

to say. He did want to dance with her, but at the same time he wanted nothing so little as the uncomfortable way he was sure to feel while he was with her. The way he felt right then.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rand blinked. "Ever?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Perrin raised broad hands in a slowing gesture. "One question at a time. I saw him on the edge of the village, watching the smithy, just at twilight yesterday. Gave me the shivers, he did. I told Master Luhhan, only nobody was there when he looked. He said I was seeing shadows. But he carried his biggest hammer around with him while we were banking the forge-fire and putting the tools up. He's never done that before."

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

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

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

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

Rand suddenly wished he had spoken more quietly. He would have if he had realized she was listening. Mat and Perrin, grinning like fools, fell all over themselves telling her of their encounters with the black-cloaked

rider, but Rand kept silent. He was sure he knew what she would say when they were done.

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

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

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



# CHAPTER

## 4

---



### *The Gleeman*

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

“The gleeman!” Egwene whispered excitedly.

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

Rand stared at the man’s eyes almost as much as at the rest of him. Everybody in the Two Rivers had dark eyes, and so did most of the merchants, and their guards, and everyone else he had ever seen. The Congars and the Coplins had made fun of him for his gray eyes, until the day he finally punched Ewal Coplin in the nose; the Wisdom had surely gotten



onto him for that. He wondered if there was a place where nobody had dark eyes. *Maybe Lan comes from there, too.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Old news, even in Baerlon," the gleeman said dismissively, "and that is the last place in the world to hear anything." He paused, looking around the village, and dryly added, "Almost the last place." Then his eyes fell on the wagon in front of the inn, standing alone now, with its shafts on the ground.

"So. I thought I recognized Padan Fain in there." His voice was still deep, but the resonance had gone, replaced by scorn. "Fain was always one to carry bad news quickly, and the worse, the faster. There's more raven in him than man."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

axe handle across the shoulders and as tall as an Aielman. What's your name, lad?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nynaeve, busy gathering her cloak around her, sniffed loudly. "Worry about the gleeman if you want, Brandelwyn al'Vere. At least he is in Emond's

Field, which is more than you can say for this false Dragon. But as long as you are worrying, there are others here who *should* excite your worry.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tam shook his head slowly. “Master Fain knew little more than he had already told. At least, little of interest to us. Battles won or lost. Cities taken



and retaken. All in Ghealdan, thank the Light. It hasn't spread, or had not the last Master Fain knew."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You want a few weeks of cold, boredom, and sleeping rough?" Tam chuckled. "Likely that's all there will be to it. I hope that's all. We're well



out of the way even for refugees. But you can speak to Master al'Vere if your mind is made up. Rand, it's time for us to be getting back to the farm."

Rand blinked in surprise. "I thought we were staying for Winter-night."

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

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

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

"Are you going to join Rand and me on the watch?" Mat asked Perrin as Tam left. "I'll bet there's nothing like this ever happened in the Two Rivers before. Why, if we get up to the Taren, we might even see soldiers, or who knows what. Even Tinkers."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Maybe," Perrin said with a sidelong glance at Mat, "we should try finding some others who've seen him. We'll see just about everybody in the

village tonight." Mat's scowl deepened, but he still did not say anything. All of them understood that Perrin meant they should find witnesses who were more reliable than Mat. "He won't laugh any louder tomorrow," Perrin added when Rand hesitated. "And I'd just as soon have somebody else with us when we go to him. Half the village would suit me fine."

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

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

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

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

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

As the cart lurched into motion, Rand took his bow and quiver from the back, awkwardly belting the quiver at his waist as he half trotted along-

side. When they reached the last row of houses in the village, he nocked an arrow, carrying it half raised and partly drawn. There was nothing to see except mostly leafless trees, but his shoulders tightened. The black rider could be on them before either of them knew it. There might not be time to draw the bow if he was not already halfway to it.

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

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

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

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

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

"They've seen the Council take the problem under consideration, and by now they'll be hearing what we decided. They chose us for the Village Council because they trust we can reason things out in the best way for

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I had to believe my own eyes then, lad, and I saw nothing." Tam shook his grizzled head. "Only young men see this fellow, it seems. When Haral Luhhan mentioned Perrin jumping shadows, though, it all came out. Jon

Thane's oldest son saw him, too, and so did Samel Crawe's boy, Bandry. Well, when four of you say you've seen a thing—and solid lads, all—we start thinking maybe it's there whether we can see it or not. All except Cenn, of course. Anyway, that's why we're going home. With both of us away, this stranger could be up to any kind of mischief there. If not for Festival, I wouldn't come back tomorrow, either. But we can't make ourselves prisoners in our own homes just because this fellow is lurking about."

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

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

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



# CHAPTER

## 5

---



### *Winternight*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

From overhead, from Tam's bedroom, came a scraping, as of something being dragged across the floor. Rand frowned. Unless Tam had suddenly decided to move the furniture around, he could only be pulling out the old

chest he kept under his bed. Another thing that had never been done in Rand's memory.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

hand on his shirt with a grimace. "The stew should be ready. I'll dish it out while you fix the tea."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Run, lad! Hide in the woods!" The bodies in the doorway jerked as others outside tried to pull them clear. Tam thrust a shoulder under the

massive table; with a grunt he heaved it over atop the tangle. "There are too many to hold! Out the back! Go! Go! I'll follow!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

was trying to fight or escape, until he realized he was grappling with the new hoe handle Tam had been shaping.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"If I move like I was stalking a rabbit," he whispered to himself, "they'll never hear me, or see me." The eerie cries echoed in the darkness, and he tried to swallow. "More like a pack of starving wolves." Soundlessly he slipped away from the barn, toward the forest, gripping the hoe handle so hard that his hands hurt.

At first, when the trees surrounded him, he took comfort from them. They helped hide him from whatever the creatures were that had attacked

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Maybe, maybe not. They don't seem very smart. Once we got into the

forest, I sent the ones after me off toward the mountains without much trouble." Tam fumbled at his right side, then put his hand close to his face. "Best act as if they are, though."

"You're hurt."

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

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

"In a bit, lad."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Careful," Tam breathed.

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

As silently as another shadow, he slid into the darkness. He thought of



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fiercely he told himself that nothing had changed. The Trollocs had done their butchery and gone. Repeating that in his mind, he crawled on



across the farmyard, keeping as low as he could, but trying to watch every direction, too. He had never thought he would envy an earthworm.

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

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

Rand recognized one by its ram's horns. The others were much the same, even in their differences, a repulsive melange of human faces distorted by muzzles, horns, feathers, and fur. Their hands, almost human, only made it worse. Two wore boots; the others had hooves. He watched without blinking until his eyes burned. None of the Trollocs moved. They had to be dead. And Tam was waiting.

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

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

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

It muttered something, guttural and sharp, then said, "Others go away. Narg stay. Narg smart." The words were distorted and hard to understand, coming from a mouth never meant for human speech. Its tone was meant to

be soothing, he thought, but he could not take his eyes off the stained teeth, long and sharp, that flashed every time the creature spoke. "Narg know some come back sometime. Narg wait. You no need sword. Put sword down."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Others come back, the Trolloc had said. The other Trollocs would be returning to the farmhouse. And a Myrddraal, a Fade. The stories said

Fades were twenty feet tall, with eyes of fire, and they rode shadows like horses. When a Fade turned sideways, it disappeared, and no wall could stop them. He had to do what he had come for, and get away quickly.

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

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

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

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

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

The barn doors stood open, one creaking on its hinges as it shifted in

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

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

Hurriedly he set the lantern and the sword on the straw-covered floor, and in the next instant he was wrestling with the cart, tipping it back over to fall upright with a snap of more breaking spokes, then throwing his shoulder into it to heave it over on the other side. The undamaged shaft stood straight out. Snatching up the sword he hacked at the well-seasoned ash. To his pleased surprise great chips flew with his strokes, and he cut through as quickly as he could have with a good axe.

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

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

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

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

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

"Don't worry," Rand said. He lay Tam's coat and cloak over him to keep

off the wind. "I'll get you to Nynaeve just as quick as I can." As he went on, as much to reassure himself as for Tam's benefit, he peeled off his blood-stained shirt, hardly even noticing the cold in his haste to be rid of it, and hurriedly pulled on the clean one. Throwing his old shirt away made him feel as if he had just had a bath. "We'll be safe in the village in no time, and the Wisdom will set everything right. You'll see. Everything's going to be all right."

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



# CHAPTER

## 6

---



### *The Westwood*

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

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

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

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

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

Knowing what he had to do, even getting on with it, did not stop him being afraid. When the Trollocs came back they would surely begin searching the forest around the farm for some trace of the people who had escaped them. The body of the one he had killed would tell them those people were not far off. Who knew what a Fade would do, or could do? On top of that, his father's comment about Trollocs' hearing was as loud in his mind as if Tam had just said it. He found himself resisting the urge to put a hand over Tam's mouth, to still his groans and murmurs. *Some track by scent. What can I do about that? Nothing.* He could not waste time worrying over problems he could do nothing about.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

to gather. But he had to keep on. That was all that kept him moving. He had to.

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

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

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

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

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

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



seemed awfully bare cover in which to hide from the eyes of anyone traveling along it.

Moonlight filtering through bare branches gave only enough illumination to fool his eyes into thinking they saw what was underfoot. Roots threatened to trip him at every step, old brambles snagged his legs, and sudden dips or rises in the ground had him half falling as his foot met nothing but air where he expected firm earth, or stumbling when his toe struck dirt while still moving forward. Tam's mutterings broke into a sharp groan whenever one of the shafts bumped too quickly over root or rock.

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

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

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

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

Rand almost fell from surprise. Wearily he lowered the litter to the ground and untangled himself. The strip of blanket left a burning groove in his shoulders. Shrugging to work the knots out, he knelt beside Tam. Fumbling for the waterbag, he peered through the trees, trying vainly in

the dim moonlight to see up and down the road, not twenty paces away. Nothing moved there but shadows. Nothing but shadows.

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

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

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

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

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

The trotting column disappeared westward, thumping footfalls fading into the darkness, but Rand remained where he was, not moving a muscle

except to breathe. Something told him to be certain, absolutely certain, they were gone before he moved. At long last he drew a deep breath and began to straighten.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In his mind he pictured Emond's Field, shutters thrown back and the

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

After a time Tam spoke up again.

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

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

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

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

“... battles are always hot, even in the snow. Sweat heat. Blood heat. Only death is cool. Slope of the mountain . . . only place didn’t stink of death. Had to get away from smell of it . . . sight of it. . . . heard a baby cry. Their women fight alongside the men, sometimes, but why they had let her come, I don’t . . . gave birth there alone, before she died of her wounds. . . . covered the child with her cloak, but the wind . . . blown the cloak away. . . . child, blue with the cold. Should have been dead, too. . . . crying there. Cry-

ing in the snow. I couldn't just leave a child. . . . no children of our own. . . . always knew you wanted children. I knew you'd take it to your heart, Kari. Yes, lass. Rand is a good name. A good name."

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

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

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



# CHAPTER

## 7

---



### *Out of the Woods*

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

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

Vaguely he caught the smell of woodsmoke. At least he was almost there if he could smell the village chimneys. A tired smile had only begun

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

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

Charred piles of rubble stood in the places of half the houses of Emond's Field. Soot-coated brick chimneys thrust like dirty fingers from heaps of blackened timbers. Thin wisps of smoke still rose from the ruins. Grimy-faced villagers, some yet in their night clothes, poked through the ashes, here pulling free a cookpot, there simply prodding forlornly at the wreckage with a stick. What little had been rescued from the flames dotted the streets; tall mirrors and polished sideboards and highchests stood in the dust among chairs and tables buried under bedding, cooking utensils, and meager piles of clothing and personal belongings.

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

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

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

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

Egwene, running by with her arms full of bedsheets torn into bandages,

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

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

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

"All the stories are real," he muttered.

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

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

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

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

"He's alive," the blacksmith said. He set down his end of the litter and straightened slowly. "I saw him a little while ago. It's a wonder any of us are alive. The way they came after my house, and the forge, you'd have thought I had gold and jewels in there. Alsbet cracked one's skull with a frying pan. She took one look at the ashes of our house this morning and set out hunting around the village with the biggest hammer she could dig out of what's



left of the forge, just in case any of them hid instead of running away. I could almost pity the thing if she finds one." He nodded to the Calder house. "Mistress Calder and a few others took in some of those who were hurt, the ones with no home of their own still standing. When the Wisdom's seen Tam, we'll find him a bed. The inn, maybe. The Mayor offered it already, but Nynaeve said the hurt folk would heal better if there weren't so many of them together."

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

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

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

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

The Wisdom dropped to her knees beside the litter without giving him so much as a glance. Her face and dress were even dirtier than Egwene's, and the same dark circles lined her eyes, though her hands, too, were clean. She felt Tam's face and thumbed open his eyelids. With a frown she pulled down the coverings and eased the bandage aside to look at the

wound. Before Rand could see what lay underneath she had replaced the wadded cloth. Sighing, she smoothed the blanket and cloak back up to Tam's neck with a gentle touch, as if tucking a child in for the night.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Egwene!"

He thought he heard a sob as she spun away from him. Then she was gone, and he was left alone beside the litter. For a moment he looked down at

Tam, feeling nothing but hollow helplessness. Suddenly his face hardened. "The Mayor will know what to do," he said, lifting the shafts once more. "The Mayor will know." Bran al'Vere always knew what to do. With weary obstinacy he set out for the Winespring Inn.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Mayor's head jerked up. "Rand? Tam!" He threw down the pen and knocked over his chair as he leaped up. "Perhaps the Light hasn't abandoned us altogether. I was afraid you were both dead. Bela galloped into the village an hour after the Trollocs left, lathered and blowing as if she'd run all the way from the farm, and I thought. . . . No time for that, now. We'll take him upstairs." He seized the rear of the litter, shouldering the gleeman out of the way. "You go get the Wisdom, Master Merrillin. And tell her I said hurry, or I'll know the reason why! Rest easy, Tam. We'll soon have you in a good, soft bed. Go, gleeman, go!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I thought . . . I don't know . . . maybe the Mayor could do something, could make her see. . . ." Hands clenched in anxious fists, Rand turned from the fireplace to Bran. "Master al'Vere, what can I do?" The rotund man shook his head helplessly. He laid a freshly dampened cloth on Tam's forehead and avoided meeting Rand's eye. "I can't just watch him die, Master al'Vere. I have to do something." The gleeman shifted as if to speak. Rand rounded on him eagerly. "Do you have an idea? I'll try anything."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The last was a shout that followed Rand through the door. He had to hold onto the sword hilt to keep the scabbard from tangling in his legs as he ran, but he would not take the time to remove it. He clattered down the



stairs and dashed out of the inn, tiredness forgotten for the moment. A chance for Tam, however small, was enough to overcome a night without sleep, for a time at least. That the chance came from an Aes Sedai, or what the price of it might be, he did not want to consider. And as for actually facing an Aes Sedai. . . . He took a deep breath and tried to move faster.

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

He stared at her. "My dreams?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rand blinked and held his tongue.

"Gently, my friend," Moiraine said. Without slowing her pace, she reached up to pat the Warder's shoulder. He towered over her protectively, as if he could give her strength just by being close. "You think only of taking care of me. Why should he not think the same of his father?" Lan scowled, but fell silent. "I am coming as quickly as I can, Rand, I promise you."

The fierceness of her eyes, or the calm of her voice—not gentle, exactly; more firmly in command—Rand did not know which to believe. Or perhaps they did go together. *Aes Sedai*. He was committed, now. He matched his stride to theirs, and tried not to think of what the price might be that they would talk about later.



# CHAPTER

## 8

---



### *A Place of Safety*

While he was still coming through the door Rand's eyes went to his father—his father no matter what *anyone* said. Tam had not moved an inch; his eyes were still shut, and his breath came in labored gasps, low and rasping. The white-haired gleeman cut off a conversation with the Mayor—who was bent over the bed again, tending Tam—and gave Moiraine an uneasy look. The Aes Sedai ignored him. Indeed, she ignored everyone except for Tam, but at him she stared with an intent frown.

Thom stuck his unlit pipe between his teeth, then snatched it out again and glowered at it. "Man cannot even smoke in peace," he muttered. "I had better make sure some farmer doesn't steal my cloak to keep his cow warm. At least I can have my pipe out there." He hurried out of the room.

Lan stared after him, his angular face as expressionless as a rock. "I do not like that man. There is something about him I don't trust. I did not see a hair of him last night."

"He was there," Bran said, watching Moiraine uncertainly. "He must have been. His cloak did not get singed in front of the fireplace."

Rand did not care if the gleeman had spent the night hiding in the stable. "My father?" he said to Moiraine pleadingly.

Bran opened his mouth, but before he could speak Moiraine said, "Leave me with him, Master al'Vere. There is nothing you can do here now except get in my way."

For a minute Bran hesitated, torn between dislike of being ordered about in his own inn and reluctance to disobey an Aes Sedai. Finally, he straightened to clap Rand on the shoulder. "Come along, boy. Let us leave Moiraine Sedai to her . . . ah . . . her. . . . There's plenty you can give me a hand with downstairs. Before you know it Tam will be shouting for his pipe and a mug of ale."

"Can I stay?" Rand spoke to Moiraine, though she did not really seem to be aware of anyone besides Tam. Bran's hand tightened, but Rand ignored him. "Please? I'll keep out of your way. You won't even know I am here. He's my father," he added with a fierceness that startled him and widened the Mayor's eyes in surprise. Rand hoped the others put it down to tiredness, or the strain of dealing with an Aes Sedai.

"Yes, yes," Moiraine said impatiently. She had tossed her cloak and staff carelessly across the only chair in the room, and now she pushed up the sleeves of her gown, baring her arms to her elbows. Her attention never really left Tam, even while she spoke. "Sit over there. And you, too, Lan." She gestured vaguely in the direction of a long bench against the wall. Her eyes traveled slowly from Tam's feet to his head, but Rand had the prickly feeling that she was looking *beyond* him in some fashion. "You may talk if you wish," she went on absently, "but do it quietly. Now, you go, Master al'Vere. This is a sickroom, not a gathering hall. See that I am not disturbed."

The Mayor grumbled under his breath, though not loudly enough to catch her attention, of course, squeezed Rand's shoulder again, then obediently, if reluctantly, closed the door behind him.

Muttering to herself, the Aes Sedai knelt beside the bed and rested her hands lightly on Tam's chest. She closed her eyes, and for a long time she neither moved nor made a sound.

In the stories Aes Sedai wonders were always accompanied by flashes and thunderclaps, or other signs to indicate mighty works and great powers. *The Power*. The One Power, drawn from the True Source that drove the Wheel of Time. That was not something Rand wanted to think about, the Power involved with Tam, himself in the same room where the Power might be used. In the same village was bad enough. For all he could tell, though, Moiraine might just as well have gone to sleep. But he thought Tam's breathing sounded easier. She must be doing something. So intent was he that he jumped when Lan spoke softly.

"That is a fine weapon you wear. Is there by chance a heron on the blade, as well?"

For a moment Rand stared at the Warder, not grasping what it was he

was talking about. He had completely forgotten Tam's sword in the lather of dealing with an Aes Sedai. It did not seem so heavy anymore. "Yes, there is. What is she doing?"

"I'd not have thought to find a heron-mark sword in a place like this," Lan said.

"It belongs to my father." He glanced at Lan's sword, the hilt just visible at the edge of his cloak; the two swords did look a good deal alike, except that no herons showed on the Warder's. He swung his eyes back to the bed. Tam's breathing did sound easier; the rasp was gone. He was sure of it. "He bought it a long time ago."

"Strange thing for a sheepherder to buy."

Rand spared a sidelong look for Lan. For a stranger to wonder about the sword was prying. For a Warder to do it. . . . Still, he felt he had to say something. "He never had any use for it, that I know of. He said it *bad* no use. Until last night, anyway. I didn't even know he had it till then."

"He called it useless, did he? He must not always have thought so." Lan touched the scabbard at Rand's waist briefly with one finger. "There are places where the heron is a symbol of the master swordsman. That blade must have traveled a strange road to end up with a sheepherder in the Two Rivers."

Rand ignored the unspoken question. Moiraine still had not moved. *Was* the Aes Sedai doing anything? He shivered and rubbed his arms, not sure he really wanted to know what she was doing. An Aes Sedai.

A question of his own popped into his head then, one he did not want to ask, one he needed an answer to. "The Mayor—" He cleared his throat, and took a deep breath. "The Mayor said the only reason there's anything left of the village is because of you and her." He made himself look at the Warder. "If you had been told about a man in the woods . . . a man who made people afraid just by looking at them . . . would that have warned you? A man whose horse doesn't make any noise? And the wind doesn't touch his cloak? Would you have known what was going to happen? Could you and Moiraine Sedai have stopped it if you'd known about him?"

"Not without half a dozen of my sisters," Moiraine said, and Rand started. She still knelt by the bed, but she had taken her hands from Tam and half turned to face the two of them on the bench. Her voice never raised, but her eyes pinned Rand to the wall. "Had I known when I left Tar Valon that I would find Trollocs and Myrddraal here, I would have brought half a dozen of them, a dozen, if I had to drag them by the scruffs of their necks. By myself, a month's warning would have made little difference. Perhaps none.

There is only so much one person can do, even calling on the One Power, and there were probably well over a hundred Trollocs scattered around this district last night. An entire fist."

"It would still have been good to know," Lan said sharply, the sharpness directed at Rand. "When did you see him, exactly, and where?"

"That's of no consequence now," Moiraine said. "I will not have the boy thinking he is to blame for something when he is not. I am as much to blame. That accursed raven yesterday, the way it behaved, should have warned me. And you, too, my old friend." Her tongue clicked angrily. "I was overconfident to the point of arrogance, sure that the Dark One's touch could not have spread so far. Nor so heavily, not yet. So sure."

Rand blinked. "The raven? I don't understand."

"Carriion eaters." Lan's mouth twisted in distaste. "The Dark One's minions often find spies among creatures that feed on death. Ravens and crows, mainly. Rats, in the cities, sometimes."

A quick shiver ran through Rand. Ravens and crows as spies of the Dark One? There were ravens and crows everywhere now. The Dark One's touch, Moiraine had said. The Dark One was always there—he knew that—but if you tried to walk in the Light, tried to live a good life, and did not name him, he could not harm you. That was what everybody believed, what everybody learned with his mother's milk. But Moiraine seemed to be saying. . . .

His glance fell on Tam, and everything else was pushed right out of his head. His father's face was noticeably less flushed than it had been, and his breathing sounded almost normal. Rand would have leaped up if Lan had not caught his arm. "You've done it."

Moiraine shook her head and sighed. "Not yet. I hope it is only not yet. Trolloc weapons are made at forges in the valley called Thakan'dar, on the very slopes of Shayol Ghul itself. Some of them take a taint from that place, a stain of evil in the metal. Those tainted blades make wounds that will not heal unaided, or cause deadly fevers, strange sicknesses that medicines cannot touch. I have soothed your father's pain, but the mark, the taint, is still in him. Left alone, it will grow again, and consume him."

"But you won't leave it alone." Rand's words were half plea, half command. He was shocked to realize he had spoken to an Aes Sedai like that, but she seemed not to notice his tone.

"I will not," she agreed simply. "I am very tired, Rand, and I have had no chance to rest since last night. Ordinarily it would not matter, but for this kind of hurt. . . . This"—she took a small bundle of white silk from

her pouch—"is an *angreal*." She saw his expression. "You know of *angreal*, then. Good."

Unconsciously he leaned back, further away from her and what she held. A few stories mentioned *angreal*, those relics of the Age of Legends that Aes Sedai used to perform their greatest wonders. He was startled to see her unwrap a smooth ivory figurine, age-darkened to deep brown. No longer than her hand, it was a woman in flowing robes, with long hair falling about her shoulders.

"We have lost the making of these," she said. "So much is lost, perhaps never to be found again. So few remain, the Amyrlin Seat almost did not allow me to take this one. It is well for Emond's Field, and for your father, that she did give her permission. But you must not hope too much. Now, even with it, I can do little more than I could have without it yesterday, and the taint is strong. It has had time to fester."

"You can help him," Rand said fervently. "I know you can."

Moiraine smiled, a bare curving of her lips. "We shall see." Then she turned back to Tam. One hand she laid on his forehead; the other cupped the ivory figure. Eyes closed, her face took on a look of concentration. She scarcely seemed to breathe.

"That rider you spoke of," Lan said quietly, "the one who made you afraid—that was surely a Myrddraal."

"A Myrddraal!" Rand exclaimed. "But Fades are twenty feet tall and. . . ." The words faded away under the Warder's mirthless grin.

"Sometimes, sheepherder, stories make things larger than truth. Believe me, the truth is big enough with a Halfman. Halfman, Lurk, Fade, Shadowman; the name depends on the land you're in, but they all mean Myrddraal. Fades are Trolloc spawn, throwbacks almost to the human stock the Dreadlords used to make the Trollocs. Almost. But if the human strain is made stronger, so is the taint that twists the Trollocs. Halfmen have powers of a kind, the sort that stem from the Dark One. Only the weakest Aes Sedai would fail to be a match for a Fade, one against one, but many a good man and true has fallen to them. Since the wars that ended the Age of Legends, since the Forsaken were bound, they have been the brain that tells the Trolloc fists where to strike. In the days of the Trolloc Wars, Halfmen led the Trollocs in battle, under the Dreadlords."

"He scared me," Rand said faintly. "He just looked at me, and. . . ." He shivered.

"No need for shame, sheepherder. They scare me, too. I've seen men who have been soldiers all their lives freeze like a bird facing a snake when

they confronted a Halfman. In the north, in the Borderlands along the Great Blight, there is a saying. The look of the Eyeless is fear."

"The Eyeless?" Rand said, and Lan nodded.

"Myrddraal see like eagles, in darkness or in light, but they have no eyes. I can think of few things more dangerous than facing a Myrddraal. Moiraine Sedai and I both tried to kill the one that was here last night, and we failed every time. Halfmen have the Dark One's own luck."

Rand swallowed. "A Trolloc said the Myrddraal wanted to talk to me. I didn't know what it meant."

Lan's head jerked up; his eyes were blue stones. "You *talked* to a Trolloc?"

"Not exactly," Rand stammered. The Warder's gaze held him like a trap. "It talked to me. It said it wouldn't hurt me, that the Myrddraal wanted to talk to me. Then it tried to kill me." He licked his lips and rubbed his hand along the nobby leather of the sword hilt. In short, choppy sentences he explained about returning to the farmhouse. "I killed it, instead," he finished. "By accident, really. It jumped at me, and I had the sword in my hand."

Lan's face softened slightly, if rock could be said to soften. "Even so, that is something to speak of, sheepherder. Until last night there were few men south of the Borderlands who could say they had seen a Trolloc, much less killed one."

"And fewer still who have slain a Trolloc alone and unaided," Moiraine said wearily. "It is done, Rand. Lan, help me up."

The Warder sprang to her side, but he was no quicker than Rand darting to the bed. Tam's skin was cool to the touch, though his face had a pale, washed-out look, as if he had spent far too long out of the sun. His eyes were still closed, but he drew the deep breaths of normal sleep.

"He will be all right now?" Rand asked anxiously.

"With rest, yes," Moiraine said. "A few weeks in bed, and he will be as good as ever." She walked unsteadily, despite holding Lan's arm. He swept her cloak and staff from the chair cushion for her to sit, and she eased herself down with a sigh. With a slow care she rewrapped the *angreal* and returned it to her pouch.

Rand's shoulders shook; he bit his lip to keep from laughing. At the same time he had to scrub a hand across his eyes to clear away tears. "Thank you."

"In the Age of Legends," Moiraine went on, "some Aes Sedai could fan life and health to flame if only the smallest spark remained. Those days are gone, though—perhaps forever. So much was lost; not just the making of *angreal*. So much that could be done which we dare not even dream of, if we



remember it at all. There are far fewer of us now. Some talents are all but gone, and many that remain seem weaker. Now there must be both will and strength for the body to draw on, or even the strongest of us can do nothing in the way of Healing. It is fortunate that your father is a strong man, both in body and spirit. As it is, he used up much of his strength in the fight for life, but all that is left now is for him to recuperate. That will take time, but the taint is gone."

"I can never repay you," he told her without taking his eyes from Tam, "but anything I can do for you, I will. Anything at all." He remembered the talk of prices, then, and his promise. Kneeling beside Tam he meant it even more than before, but it still was not easy to look at her. "Anything. As long as it does not hurt the village, or my friends."

Moiraine raised a hand dismissively. "If you think it is necessary. I would like to talk with you, anyway. You will no doubt leave at the same time we do, and we can speak at length then."

"Leave!" he exclaimed, scrambling to his feet. "Is it really that bad? Everyone looked to me as if they were ready to start rebuilding. We are pretty settled folk in the Two Rivers. Nobody ever leaves."

"Rand—"

"And where would we go? Padan Fain said the weather is just as bad everywhere else. He's . . . he was . . . the peddler. The Trollocs. . . ." Rand swallowed, wishing Thom Merrill had not told him what Trollocs ate. "The best I can see to do is stay right here where we belong, in the Two Rivers, and put things back together. We have crops in the ground, and it has to warm enough for the shearing, soon. I don't know who started this talk about leaving—one of the Coplins, I'll bet—but whoever it was—"

"Shepherd," Lan broke in, "you talk when you should be listening."

He blinked at both of them. He had been half babbling, he realized, and he had rambled on while she tried to talk. While an Aes Sedai tried to talk. He wondered what to say, how to apologize, but Moiraine smiled while he was still thinking.

"I understand how you feel, Rand," she said, and he had the uncomfortable feeling that she really did. "Think no more of it." Her mouth tightened, and she shook her head. "I have handled this badly, I see. I should have rested, first, I suppose. It is you who will be leaving, Rand. You who must leave, for the sake of your village."

"Me?" He cleared his throat and tried again. "Me?" It sounded a little better this time. "Why do I have to go? I don't understand any of this. I don't want to go anywhere."

Moiraine looked at Lan, and the Warder unfolded his arms. He looked at Rand from under his leather headband, and Rand had the feeling of being weighed on invisible scales again. "Did you know," Lan said suddenly, "that some homes were not attacked?"

"Half the village is in ashes," he protested, but the Warder waved it away.

"Some houses were only torched to create confusion. The Trollocs ignored them afterwards, and the people who fled from them as well, unless they actually got in the way of the true attack. Most of the people who've come in from the outlying farms never saw a hair of a Trolloc, and that only at a distance. Most never knew there was any trouble until they saw the village."

"I did hear about Darl Coplin," Rand said slowly. "I suppose it just didn't sink in."

"Two farms were attacked," Lan went on. "Yours and one other. Because of Bel Tine everyone who lived at the second farm was already in the village. Many people were saved because the Myrddraal was ignorant of Two Rivers customs. Festival and Winternight made its task all but impossible, but it did not know that."

Rand looked at Moiraine, leaning back in the chair, but she said nothing, only watched him, a finger laid across her lips. "Our farm, and who else's?" he asked finally.

"The Aybara farm," Lan replied. "Here in Emond's Field, they struck first at the forge, and the blacksmith's house, and Master Cauthon's house."

Rand's mouth was suddenly dry. "That's crazy," he managed to get out, then jumped as Moiraine straightened.

"Not crazy, Rand," she said. "Purposeful. The Trollocs did not come to Emond's Field by happenstance, and they did not do what they did for the pleasure of killing and burning, however much that delighted them. They knew what, or rather who, they were after. The Trollocs came to kill or capture young men of a certain age who live near Emond's Field."

"My age?" Rand's voice shook, and he did not care. "Light! Mat. What about Perrin?"

"Alive and well," Moiraine assured him, "if a trifle sooty."

"Ban Crawe and Lem Thane?"

"Were never in any danger," Lan said. "At least, no more than anyone else."

"But they saw the rider, the Fade, too, and they're the same age as I am."

"Master Crowe's house was not even damaged," Moiraine said, "and the miller and his family slept through half the attack before the noise woke them. Ban is ten months older than you, and Lem eight months younger." She smiled dryly at his surprise. "I told you I asked questions. And I also said young men of a *certain* age. You and your two friends are within weeks of one another. It was you three the Myrddraal sought, and none others."

Rand shifted uneasily, wishing she would not look at him like that, as if her eyes could pierce his brain and read what lay in every corner of it. "What would they want with us? We're just farmers, shepherds."

"That is a question that has no answer in the Two Rivers," Moiraine said quietly, "but the answer is important. Trollocs where they have not been seen in almost two thousand years tells us that much."

"Lots of stories tell about Trolloc raids," Rand said stubbornly. "We just never had one here before. Warders fight Trollocs all the time."

Lan snorted. "Boy, I expect to fight Trollocs along the Great Blight, but not here, nearly six hundred leagues to the south. That was as hot a raid last night as I'd expect to see in Shienar, or any of the Borderlands."

"In one of you," Moiraine said, "or all three, there is something the Dark One fears."

"That . . . that's impossible." Rand stumbled to the window and stared out at the village, at the people working among the ruins. "I don't care what's happened, that is just impossible." Something on the Green caught his eye. He stared, then realized it was the blackened stump of the Spring Pole. A fine Bel Tine, with a peddler, and a gleeman, and strangers. He shivered, and shook his head violently. "No. No, I'm a shepherd. The Dark One can't be interested in me."

"It took a great deal of effort," Lan said grimly, "to bring so many Trollocs so far without raising a hue and cry from the Borderlands to Caemlyn and beyond. I wish I knew how they did it. Do you really believe they went to all that bother just to burn a few houses?"

"They will be back," Moiraine added.

Rand had his mouth open to argue with Lan, but that brought him up short. He spun to face her. "Back? Can't you stop them? You did last night, and you were surprised, then. Now you know they are here."

"Perhaps," Moiraine replied. "I could send to Tar Valon for some of my sisters; they might have time to make the journey before we need them. The Myrddraal knows *I* am here, too, and it probably will not attack—not openly, at least—lacking reinforcements, more Myrddraal and more Trollocs.

With enough Aes Sedai and enough Warders, the Trollocs can be beaten off, though I cannot say how many battles it will take.”

A vision danced in his head, of Emond’s Field all in ashes. All the farms burned. And Watch Hill, and Deven Ride, and Taren Ferry. All ashes and blood. “No,” he said, and felt a wrenching inside as if he had lost his grip on something. “That’s why I have to leave, isn’t it? The Trollocs won’t come back if I am not here.” A last trace of obstinacy made him add, “If they really are after me.”

Moiraine’s eyebrows raised as if she were surprised that he was not convinced, but Lan said, “Are you willing to bet your village on it, sheepherder? Your whole Two Rivers?”

Rand’s stubbornness faded. “No,” he said again, and felt that emptiness inside again, too. “Perrin and Mat have to go, too, don’t they?” Leaving the Two Rivers. Leaving his home and his father. At least Tam would get better. At least he would be able to hear him say all that on the Quarry Road had been nonsense. “We could go to Baerlon, I suppose, or even Caemlyn. I’ve heard there are more people in Caemlyn than in the whole Two Rivers. We’d be safe there.” He tried out a laugh that sounded hollow. “I used to daydream about seeing Caemlyn. I never thought it would come about like this.”

There was a long silence, then Lan said, “I would not count on Caemlyn for safety. If the Myrddraal want you badly enough, they will find a way. Walls are a poor bar to a Halfman. And you would be a fool not to believe they want you very badly indeed.”

Rand thought his spirits had sunk as low as they possibly could, but at that they slid deeper.

“There is a place of safety,” Moiraine said softly, and Rand’s ears pricked up to listen. “In Tar Valon you would be among Aes Sedai and Warders. Even during the Trolloc Wars the forces of the Dark One feared to attack the Shining Walls. The one attempt was their greatest defeat until the very end. And Tar Valon holds all the knowledge we Aes Sedai have gathered since the Time of Madness. Some fragments even date from the Age of Legends. In Tar Valon, if anywhere, you will be able to learn why the Myrddraal want you. Why the Father of Lies wants you. That I can promise.”

A journey all the way to Tar Valon was almost beyond thinking. A journey to a place where he would be surrounded by Aes Sedai. Of course, Moiraine had healed Tam—or it looked as if she had, at least—but there were all those stories. It was uncomfortable enough to be in a room with

one Aes Sedai, but to be in a city full of them. . . . And she still had not demanded her price. There was always a price, so the stories said.

"How long will my father sleep?" he asked at last. "I . . . I have to tell him. He shouldn't just wake and find me gone." He thought he heard Lan give a sigh of relief. He looked at the Warder curiously, but Lan's face was as expressionless as ever.

"It is unlikely he will wake before we depart," Moiraine said. "I mean to go soon after full dark. Even a single day of delay could be fatal. It will be best if you leave him a note."

"In the night?" Rand said doubtfully, and Lan nodded.

"The Halfman will discover we are gone soon enough. There is no need to make things any easier for it than we must."

Rand fussed with his father's blankets. It was a very long way to Tar Valon. "In that case. . . . In that case, I had better go find Mat and Perrin."

"I will attend to that." Moiraine got to her feet briskly and donned her cloak with suddenly restored vigor. She put a hand on his shoulder, and he tried very hard not to flinch. She did not press hard, but it was an iron grip that held him as surely as a forked stick held a snake. "It will be best if we keep all of this just among us. Do you understand? The same ones who put the Dragon's Fang on the inn door might make trouble if they knew."

"I understand." He drew a relieved breath when she took her hand away.

"I will have Mistress al'Vere bring you something to eat," she went on just as if she had not noticed his reaction. "Then you need to sleep. It will be a hard journey tonight even if you are rested."

The door closed behind them, and Rand stood looking down at Tam—looking at Tam, but seeing nothing. Not until that very minute had he realized that Emond's Field was a part of him as much as he was a part of it. He realized it now because he knew that was what he had felt tearing loose. He was apart from the village, now. The Shepherd of the Night wanted him. It was impossible—he was only a farmer—but the Trollocs had come, and Lan was right about one thing. He could not risk the village on the chance Moiraine was wrong. He could not even tell anyone; the Coplins really would make trouble about something like that. He had to trust an Aes Sedai.

"Don't wake him, now," Mistress al'Vere said, as the Mayor shut the door behind his wife and himself. The cloth-covered tray she carried gave off delicious, warm smells. She set it on the chest against the wall, then firmly moved Rand away from the bed.

"Mistress Moiraine told me what he needs," she said softly, "and it does not include you falling on top of him from exhaustion. I've brought you a bite to eat. Don't let it get cold, now."

"I wish you wouldn't call her that," Bran said peevishly. "Moiraine Sedai is proper. She might get mad."

Mistress al'Vere gave him a pat on the cheek. "You just leave me to worry about that. She and I had a long talk. And keep your voice down. If you wake Tam, you'll have to answer to me *and* Moiraine Sedai." She put an emphasis on Moiraine's title that made Bran's insistence seem foolish. "The two of you keep out of my way." With a fond smile for her husband, she turned to the bed and Tam.

Master al'Vere gave Rand a frustrated look. "She's an Aes Sedai. Half the women in the village act as if she sits in the Women's Circle, and the rest as if she were a Trolloc. Not a one of them seems to realize you have to be careful around Aes Sedai. The men may keep looking at her sideways, but at least they aren't doing anything that might provoke her."

Careful, Rand thought. It was not too late to start being careful. "Master al'Vere," he said slowly, "do you know how many farms were attacked?"

"Only two that I've heard of so far, including your place." The Mayor paused, frowning, then shrugged. "It doesn't seem enough, with what happened here. I should be glad of it, but. . . . Well, we'll probably hear of more before the day is out."

Rand sighed. No need to ask which farms. "Here in the village, did they. . . . I mean, was there anything to show what they were after?"

"After, boy? I don't know that they were after anything, except maybe killing us all. It was just the way I said. The dogs barking, and Moiraine Sedai and Lan running through the streets, then somebody shouted that Master Luhhan's house and the forge were on fire. Abell Cauthon's house flared up—odd that; it's nearly in the middle of the village. Anyway, the next thing the Trollocs were all among us. No, I don't think they were *after* anything." He gave an abrupt bark of a laugh, and cut it short with a wary look at his wife. She did not look around from Tam. "To tell the truth," he went on more quietly, "they seemed almost as confused as we were. I doubt they expected to find an Aes Sedai here, or a Warder."

"I suppose not," Rand said, grimacing.

If Moiraine had told the truth about that, she probably had told the truth about the rest, too. For a moment he thought about asking the

Mayor's advice, but Master al'Vere obviously knew little more about Aes Sedai than anyone else in the village. Besides, he was reluctant to tell even the Mayor what was going on—what Moiraine said was going on. He was not sure if he was more afraid of being laughed at or being believed. He rubbed a thumb against the hilt of Tam's sword. His father had been out into the world; he must know more about Aes Sedai than the Mayor did. But if Tam really had been out of the Two Rivers, then maybe what he had said in the Westwood. . . . He scrubbed both hands through his hair, scattering that line of thought.

"You need sleep, lad," the Mayor said.

"Yes, you do," Mistress al'Vere added. "You're almost falling down where you stand."

Rand blinked at her in surprise. He had not even realized she had left his father. He did need sleep; just the thought set off a yawn.

"You can take the bed in the next room," the Mayor said. "There's already a fire laid."

Rand looked at his father; Tam was still deep in sleep, and that made him yawn again. "I'd rather stay in here, if you don't mind. For when he wakes up."

Sickroom matters were in Mistress al'Vere's province, and the Mayor left it to her. She hesitated only a moment before nodding. "But you let him wake on his own. If you bother his sleep. . . ." He tried to say he would do as she ordered, but the words got tangled in yet another yawn. She shook her head with a smile. "You will be asleep yourself in no time at all. If you must stay, curl up next to the fire. And drink a little of that beef broth before you doze off."

"I will," Rand said. He would have agreed to anything that kept him in that room. "And I won't wake him."

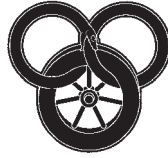
"See that you do not," Mistress al'Vere told him firmly, but not in an unkindly way. "I'll bring you up a pillow and some blankets."

When the door finally closed behind them, Rand dragged the lone chair in the room over beside the bed and sat down where he could watch Tam. It was all very well for Mistress al'Vere to talk about sleep—his jaws cracked as he stifled a yawn—but he could not sleep yet. Tam might wake at any time, and maybe only stay awake a short while. Rand had to be waiting when he did.

He grimaced and twisted in the chair, absently shifting the sword hilt out of his ribs. He still felt backward about telling anyone what Moiraine

had said, but this was Tam, after all. This was. . . . Without realizing it he set his jaw determinedly. *My father. I can tell my father anything.*

He twisted a little more in the chair and put his head against the chairback. Tam was his father, and nobody could tell him what to say or not say to his father. He just had to stay awake until Tam woke up. He just had to. . . .





# CHAPTER

## 9

---



### *Tellings of the Wheel*

Rand's heart pounded as he ran, and he stared in dismay at the barren hills surrounding him. This was not just a place where spring was late in coming; spring had never come here, and never would come. Nothing grew in the cold soil that crunched under his boots, not so much as a bit of lichen. He scrambled past boulders, twice as tall as he was; dust coated the stone as if never a drop of rain had touched it. The sun was a swollen, blood-red ball, more fiery than on the hottest day of summer and bright enough to sear his eyes, but it stood stark against a leaden cauldron of a sky where clouds of sharp black and silver roiled and boiled on every horizon. For all the swirling clouds, though, no breath of breeze stirred across the land, and despite the sullen sun the air burned cold like the depths of winter.

Rand looked over his shoulder often as he ran, but he could not see his pursuers. Only desolate hills and jagged black mountains, many topped by tall plumes of dark smoke rising to join the milling clouds. If he could not see his hunters, though, he could hear them, howling behind him, guttural voices shouting with the glee of the chase, howling with the joy of blood to come. Trollocs. Coming closer, and his strength was almost gone.

With desperate haste he scrambled to the top of a knife-edged ridge, then dropped to his knees with a groan. Below him a sheer rock wall fell away, a thousand-foot cliff plummeting into a vast canyon. Steamy mists covered the canyon floor, their thick gray surface rolling in grim waves,

rolling and breaking against the cliff beneath him, but more slowly than any ocean wave had ever moved. Patches of fog glowed red for an instant as if great fires had suddenly flared beneath, then died. Thunder rumbled in the depths of the valley, and lightning crackled through the gray, sometimes striking up at the sky.

It was not the valley itself that sapped his strength and filled the empty spaces left with helplessness. From the center of the furious vapors a mountain thrust upward, a mountain taller than any he had ever seen in the Mountains of Mist, a mountain as black as the loss of all hope. That bleak stone spire, a dagger stabbing at the heavens, was the source of his desolation. He had never seen it before, but he knew it. The memory of it flashed away like quicksilver when he tried to touch it, but the memory was there. He knew it was there.

Unseen fingers touched him, pulled at his arms and legs, trying to draw him to the mountain. His body twitched, ready to obey. His arms and legs stiffened as if he thought he could dig his fingers and toes into the stone. Ghostly strings entwined around his heart, pulling him calling him to the spire mountain. Tears ran down his face, and he sagged to the ground. He felt his will draining away like water out of a holed bucket. Just a little longer, and he would go where he was called. He would obey, do as he was told. Abruptly he discovered another emotion: anger. Push him, pull him, he was not a sheep to be prodded into a pen. The anger squeezed itself into one hard knot, and he clung to it as he would have clung to a raft in a flood.

*Serve me*, a voice whispered in the stillness of his mind. A familiar voice. If he listened hard enough he was sure he would know it. *Serve me*. He shook his head to try to get it out of his head. *Serve me!* He shook his fist at the black mountain. "The Light consume you, Shai'tan!"

Abruptly the smell of death lay thick around him. A figure loomed over him, in a cloak the color of dried blood, a figure with a face. . . . He did not want to see the face that looked down at him. He did not want to think of that face. It hurt to think of it, turned his mind to embers. A hand reached toward him. Not caring if he fell over the edge, he threw himself away. He had to get away. Far away. He fell, flailing at the air, wanting to scream, finding no breath for screaming, no breath at all.

Abruptly he was no longer in the barren land, no longer falling. Winter-brown grass flattened under his boots; it seemed like flowers. He almost laughed to see scattered trees and bushes, leafless as they were, dotting the gently rolling plain that now surrounded him. In the distance reared a sin-

gle mountain, its peak broken and split, but this mountain brought no fear or despair. It was just a mountain, though oddly out of place there, with no other in sight.

A broad river flowed by the mountain, and on an island in the middle of that river was a city such as might live in a gleeman's tale, a city surrounded by high walls gleaming white and silver beneath the warm sun. With mingled relief and joy he started for the walls, for the safety and serenity he somehow knew he would find behind them.

As he came closer he made out soaring towers, many joined by wondrous walkways that spanned the open air. High bridges arched from both banks of the river to the island city. Even at a distance he could see lacy stonework on those spans, seemingly too delicate to withstand the swift waters that rushed beneath them. Beyond those bridges lay safety. Sanctuary.

Of a sudden a chill ran along his bones; an icy clamminess settled on his skin, and the air around him turned fetid and dank. Without looking back he ran, ran from the pursuer whose freezing fingers brushed his back and tugged at his cloak, ran from the light-eating figure with the face that. . . . He could not remember the face, except as terror. He did not want to remember the face. He ran, and the ground passed beneath his feet, rolling hills and flat plain . . . and he wanted to howl like a dog gone mad. The city was receding before him. The harder he ran, the further away drifted the white shining walls and haven. They grew smaller, and smaller, until only a pale speck remained on the horizon. The cold hand of his pursuer clutched at his collar. If those fingers touched him he knew he would go mad. Or worse. Much worse. Even as that surety came to him he tripped and fell . . .

"Noooo!" he screamed.

. . . and grunted as paving stones smacked the breath out of him. Wonderingly he got to his feet. He stood on the approaches to one of the marvelous bridges he had seen rearing over the river. Smiling people walked by on either side of him, people dressed in so many colors they made him think of a field of wildflowers. Some of them spoke to him, but he could not understand, though the words sounded as if he should. But the faces were friendly, and the people gestured him onward, over the bridge with its intricate stonework, onward toward the shining, silver-streaked walls and the towers beyond. Toward the safety he knew waited there.

He joined the throng streaming across the bridge and into the city

through massive gates set in tall, pristine walls. Within was a wonderland where the meanest structure seemed a palace. It was as though the builders had been told to take stone and brick and tile and create beauty to take the breath of mortal men. There was no building, no monument that did not make him stare with goggling eyes. Music drifted down the streets, a hundred different songs, but all blending with the clamor of the crowds to make one grand, joyous harmony. The scents of sweet perfumes and sharp spices, of wondrous foods and myriad flowers, all floated in the air, as if every good smell in the world were gathered there.

The street by which he entered the city, broad and paved with smooth, gray stone, stretched straight before him toward the center of the city. At its end loomed a tower larger and taller than any other in the city, a tower as white as fresh-fallen snow. That tower was where safety lay, and the knowledge he sought. But the city was such as he had never dreamed of seeing. Surely it would not matter if he delayed just a short time in going to the tower? He turned aside onto a narrower street, where jugglers strolled among hawkers of strange fruits.

Ahead of him down the street was a snow-white tower. The same tower. In just a little while, he thought, and rounded another corner. At the far end of this street, too, lay the white tower. Stubbornly he turned another corner, and another, and each time the alabaster tower met his eyes. He spun to run away from it . . . and skidded to a halt. Before him, the white tower. He was afraid to look over his shoulder, afraid it would be there, too.

The faces around him were still friendly, but shattered hope filled them now, hope he had broken. Still the people gestured him forward, pleading gestures. Toward the tower. Their eyes shone with desperate need, and only he could fulfill it, only he could save them.

*Very well*, he thought. The tower was, after all, where he wanted to go.

Even as he took his first step forward disappointment faded from those about him, and smiles wreathed every face. They moved with him, and small children strewed his path with flower petals. He looked over his shoulder in confusion, wondering who the flowers were meant for, but behind him were only more smiling people gesturing him on. *They must be for me*, he thought, and wondered why that suddenly did not seem strange at all. But wonderment lasted only a moment before melting away; all was as it should be.

First one, then another of the people began to sing, until every voice was lifted in a glorious anthem. He still could not understand the words,

but a dozen interweaving harmonies shouted joy and salvation. Musicians capered through the on-flowing crowd, adding flutes and harps and drums in a dozen sizes to the hymn, and all the songs he had heard before blended in without seam. Girls danced around him, laying garlands of sweet-smelling blossoms across his shoulders, twining them about his neck. They smiled at him, their delight growing with every step he took. He could not help but smile back. His feet itched to join in their dance, and even as he thought of it he was dancing, his steps fitting as if he had known it all from birth. He threw back his head and laughed; his feet were lighter than they had ever been, dancing with. . . . He could not remember the name, but it did not seem important.

*It is your destiny*, a voice whispered in his head, and the whisper was a thread in the paean.

Carrying him like a twig on the crest of a wave, the crowd flowed into a huge square in the middle of the city, and for the first time he saw that the white tower rose from a great palace of pale marble, sculpted rather than built, curving walls and swelling domes and delicate spires fingering the sky. The whole of it made him gasp in awe. Broad stairs of pristine stone led up from the square, and at the foot of those stairs the people halted, but their song rose ever higher. The swelling voices buoyed his feet. *Your destiny*, the voice whispered, insistent now, eager.

He no longer danced, but neither did he stop. He mounted the stairs without hesitation. This was where he belonged.

Scrollwork covered the massive doors at the top of the stairs, carvings so intricate and delicate that he could not imagine a knife blade fine enough to fit. The portals swung open, and he went in. They closed behind him with an echoing crash like thunder.

"We have been waiting for you," the Myrddraal hissed.

Rand sat bolt upright, gasping for breath and shivering, staring. Tam was still asleep on the bed. Slowly his breathing slowed. Half-consumed logs blazed in the fireplace with a good bed of coals built up around the fire-irons; someone had been there to tend it while he slept. A blanket lay at his feet, where it had fallen when he woke. The makeshift litter was gone, too, and his and Tam's cloaks had been hung by the door.

He wiped cold sweat from his face with a hand that was none too steady and wondered if naming the Dark One in a dream brought his attention the same way that naming him aloud did.

Twilight darkened the window; the moon was well up, round and fat, and evening stars sparkled above the Mountains of Mist. He had slept the day away. He rubbed a sore spot on his side. Apparently he had slept with the sword hilt jabbing him in the ribs. Between that and an empty stomach and the night before, it was no wonder he had had nightmares.

His belly rumbled, and he got up stiffly and made his way to the table where Mistress al'Vere had left the tray. He twitched aside the white napkin. Despite the time he had slept, the beef broth was still warm, and so was the crusty bread. Mistress al'Vere's hand was plain; the tray had been replaced. Once she decided you needed a hot meal, she did not give up till it was inside you.

He gulped down some broth, and it was all he could do to put some meat and cheese between two pieces of bread before stuffing it in his mouth. Taking big bites, he went back to the bed.

Mistress al'Vere had apparently seen to Tam, as well. Tam had been undressed, his clothes now clean and neatly folded on the bedside table, and a blanket was drawn up under his chin. When Rand touched his father's forehead, Tam opened his eyes.

"There you are, boy. Marin said you were here, but I couldn't even sit up to see. She said you were too tired for her to wake just so I could look at you. Even Bran can't get around her when she has her mind set."

Tam's voice was weak, but his gaze was clear and steady. *The Aes Sedai was right*, Rand thought. With rest he would be as good as ever.

"Can I get you something to eat? Mistress al'Vere left a tray."

"She fed me already . . . if you can call it that. Wouldn't let me have anything but broth. How can a man avoid bad dreams with nothing but broth in his. . . ." Tam fumbled a hand from under the cover and touched the sword at Rand's waist. "Then it wasn't a dream. When Marin told me I was sick, I thought I had been. . . . But you're all right. That is all that matters. What of the farm?"

Rand took a deep breath. "The Trollocs killed the sheep. I think they took the cow, too, and the house needs a good cleaning." He managed a weak smile. "We were luckier than some. They burned half the village."

He told Tam everything that had happened, or at least most of it. Tam listened closely, and asked sharp questions, so he found himself having to tell about returning to the farmhouse from the woods, and that brought in the Trolloc he had killed. He had to tell how Nynaeve had said Tam was dying to explain why the Aes Sedai had tended him instead of the Wisdom. Tam's eyes widened at that, an Aes Sedai in Emond's Field. But Rand

could see no need to go over every step of the journey from the farm, or his fears, or the Myrddraal on the road. Certainly not his nightmares as he slept by the bed. Especially he saw no reason to mention Tam's ramblings under the fever. Not yet. Moiraine's story, though: there was no avoiding that.

"Now that's a tale to make a gleeman proud," Tam muttered when he was done. "What would Trollocs want with you boys? Or the Dark One, Light help us?"

"You think she was lying? Master al'Vere said she was telling the truth about only two farms being attacked. And about Master Luhhan's house, and Master Cauthon's."

For a moment Tam lay silent before saying, "Tell me what she said. Her exact words, mind, just as she said them."

Rand struggled. Who ever remembered the *exact* words they heard? He chewed at his lip and scratched his head, and bit by bit he brought it out, as nearly as he could remember. "I can't think of anything else," he finished. "Some of it I'm not too sure she didn't say a little differently, but it's close, anyway."

"It's good enough. It has to be, doesn't it? You see, lad, Aes Sedai are tricky. They don't lie, not right out, but the truth an Aes Sedai tells you is not always the truth you think it is. You take care around her."

"I've heard the stories," Rand retorted. "I'm not a child."

"So you're not, so you're not." Tam sighed heavily, then shrugged in annoyance. "I should be going along with you, just the same. The world outside the Two Rivers is nothing like Emond's Field."

That was an opening to ask about Tam going outside and all the rest of it, but Rand did not take it. His mouth fell open, instead. "Just like that? I thought you would try to talk me out of it. I thought you'd have a hundred reasons I should not go." He realized he had been hoping Tam would have a hundred reasons, and good ones.

"Maybe not a hundred," Tam said with a snort, "but a few did come to mind. Only they don't count for much. If Trollocs are after you, you will be safer in Tar Valon than you could ever be here. Just remember to be wary. Aes Sedai do things for their own reasons, and those are not always the reasons you think."

"The gleeman said something like that," Rand said slowly.

"Then he knows what he's talking about. You listen sharp, think deep, and guard your tongue. That's good advice for any dealings beyond the Two Rivers, but most especially with Aes Sedai. And with Warders. Tell

Lan something, and you've as good as told Moiraine. If he's a Warder, then he's bonded to her as sure as the sun rose this morning, and he won't keep many secrets from her, if any."

Rand knew little about the bonding between Aes Sedai and Warders, though it played a big part in every story about Warders he had ever heard. It was something to do with the Power, a gift to the Warder, or maybe some sort of exchange. The Warders got all sorts of benefits, according to the stories. They healed more quickly than other men, and could go longer without food or water or sleep. Supposedly they could sense Trollocs, if they were close enough, and other creatures of the Dark One, too, which explained how Lan and Moiraine had tried to warn the village before the attack. As to what the Aes Sedai got out of it, the stories were silent, but he was not about to believe they did not get something.

"I'll be careful," Rand said. "I just wish I knew why. It doesn't make any sense. Why me? Why us?"

"I wish I knew, too, boy. Blood and ashes, I wish I knew." Tam sighed heavily. "Well, no use trying to put a broken egg back in the shell, I suppose. How soon do you have to go? I'll be back on my feet in a day or two, and we can see about starting a new flock. Oren Dautry has some good stock he might be willing to part with, with the pastures all gone, and so does Jon Thane."

"Moiraine . . . the Aes Sedai said you had to stay in bed. She said weeks." Tam opened his mouth, but Rand went on. "And she talked to Mistress al'Vere."

"Oh. Well, maybe I can talk Marin around." Tam did not sound hopeful of it, though. He gave Rand a sharp look. "The way you avoided answering means you have to leave soon. Tomorrow? Or tonight?"

"Tonight," Rand said quietly, and Tam nodded sadly.

"Yes. Well, if it must be done, best not to delay. But we will see about this 'weeks' business." He plucked at his blankets with more irritation than strength. "Perhaps I'll follow in a few days anyway. Catch you up on the road. We will see if Marin can keep me in bed when I want to get up."

There was a tap at the door, and Lan stuck his head into the room. "Say your goodbyes quickly, shepherd, and come. There may be trouble."

"Trouble?" Rand said, and the Warder growled at him impatiently.

"Just hurry!"

Hastily Rand snatched up his cloak. He started to undo the sword belt, but Tam spoke up.



"Keep it. You will probably have more need of it than I, though, the Light willing, neither of us will. Take care, lad. You hear?"

Ignoring Lan's continued growls, Rand bent to grab Tam in a hug. "I will come back. I promise you that."

"Of course you will." Tam laughed. He returned the hug weakly, and ended by patting Rand on the back. "I know that. And I'll have twice as many sheep for you to tend when you return. Now go, before that fellow does himself an injury."

Rand tried to hang back, tried to find the words for the question he did not want to ask, but Lan entered the room to catch him by the arm and pull him into the hall. The Warder had donned a dull gray-green tunic of overlapping metal scales. His voice rasped with irritation.

"We have to hurry. Don't you understand the word *trouble*?"

Outside the room Mat waited, cloaked and coated and carrying his bow. A quiver hung at his waist. He was rocking anxiously on his heels, and he kept glancing off toward the stairs with what seemed to be equal parts impatience and fear. "This isn't much like the stories, Rand, is it?" he said hoarsely.

"What kind of trouble?" Rand demanded, but the Warder ran ahead of him instead of answering, taking the steps down two at a time. Mat dashed after him with quick gestures for Rand to follow.

Shrugging into his cloak, he caught up to them downstairs. Only a feeble light filled the common room; half the candles had burned out and most of the rest were guttering. It was empty except for the three of them. Mat stood next to one of the front windows, peeping out as if trying not to be seen. Lan held the door open a crack and peered into the inn yard.

Wondering what they could be watching, Rand went to join him. The Warder muttered at him to take a care, but he did open the door a trifle wider to make room for Rand to look, too.

At first he was not sure exactly what he was seeing. A crowd of village men, some three dozen or so, clustered near the burned-out husk of the peddler's wagon, night pushed back by the torches some of them carried. Moiraine faced them, her back to the inn, leaning with seeming casualness on her walking staff. Hari Coplin stood in the front of the crowd with his brother, Darl, and Bili Congar. Cenn Buie was there, as well, looking uncomfortable. Rand was startled to see Hari shake his fist at Moiraine.

"Leave Emond's Field!" the sour-faced farmer shouted. A few voices in the crowd echoed him, but hesitantly, and no one pushed forward. They

might be willing to confront an Aes Sedai from within a crowd, but none of them wanted to be singled out. Not by an Aes Sedai who had every reason to take offense.

"You brought those monsters!" Darl roared. He waved a torch over his head, and there were shouts of, "You brought them!" and "It's your fault!" led by his cousin Bili.

Hari elbowed Cenn Buie, and the old thatcher pursed his lips and gave him a sidelong glare. "Those things . . . those Trollocs didn't appear until after you came," Cenn muttered, barely loud enough to be heard. He swung his head from side to side dourly as if wishing he were somewhere else and looking for a way to get there. "You're an Aes Sedai. We want none of your sort in the Two Rivers. Aes Sedai bring trouble on their backs. If you stay, you will only bring more."

His speech brought no response from the gathered villagers, and Hari scowled in frustration. Abruptly he snatched Darl's torch and shook it in her direction. "Get out!" he shouted. "Or we'll burn you out!"

Dead silence fell, except for the shuffling of a few feet as men drew back. Two Rivers folk could fight back if they were attacked, but violence was far from common, and threatening people was foreign to them, beyond the occasional shaking of a fist. Cenn Buie, Bili Congar, and the Coplins were left out front alone. Bili looked as if he wanted to back away, too.

Hari gave an uneasy start at the lack of support, but he recovered quickly. "Get out!" he shouted again, echoed by Darl and, more weakly, by Bili. Hari glared at the others. Most of the crowd failed to meet his eye.

Suddenly Bran al'Vere and Haral Luhhan moved out of the shadows, stopping apart from both the Aes Sedai and the crowd. In one hand the Mayor casually carried the big wooden maul he used to drive spigots into casks. "Did someone suggest burning my inn?" he asked softly.

The two Coplins took a step back, and Cenn Buie edged away from them. Bili Congar dived into the crowd. "Not that," Darl said quickly. "We never said that, Bran . . . ah, Mayor."

Bran nodded. "Then perhaps I heard you threatening to harm guests in my inn?"

"She's an Aes Sedai," Hari began angrily, but his words cut off as Haral Luhhan moved.

The blacksmith simply stretched, thrusting thick arms over his head, tightening massive fists until his knuckles cracked, but Hari looked at the burly man as if one of those fists had been shaken under his nose. Haral

folded his arms across his chest. "Your pardon, Hari. I did not mean to cut you off. You were saying?"

But Hari, shoulders hunched as though he were trying to draw into himself and disappear, seemed to have nothing more to say.

"I'm surprised at you people," Bran rumbled. "Paet al'Caar, your boy's leg was broken last night, but I saw him walking on it today—because of her. Eward Candwin, you were lying on your belly with a gash down your back like a fish for cleaning, till she laid hands on you. Now it looks as if it happened a month ago, and unless I misdoubt there'll barely be a scar. And you, Cenn." The thatcher started to fade back into the crowd, but stopped, held uncomfortably by Bran's gaze. "I'd be shocked to see any man on the Village Council here, Cenn, but you most of all. Your arm would still be hanging useless at your side, a mass of burns and bruises, if not for her. If you have no gratitude, have you no shame?"

Cenn half lifted his right hand, then looked away from it angrily. "I cannot deny what she did," he muttered, and he did sound ashamed. "She helped me, and others," he went on in a pleading tone, "but she's an Aes Sedai, Bran. If those Trollocs didn't come because of her, why did they come? We want no part of Aes Sedai in the Two Rivers. Let them keep their troubles away from us."

A few men, safely back in the crowd, shouted then. "We want no Aes Sedai troubles!" "Send her away!" "Drive her out!" "Why did they come if not because of her?"

A scowl grew on Bran's face, but before he could speak Moiraine suddenly whirled her vine-carved staff above her head, spinning it with both hands. Rand's gasp echoed that of the villagers, for a hissing white flame flared from each end of the staff, standing straight out like spearpoints despite the rod's whirling. Even Bran and Haral edged away from her. She snapped her arms down straight out before her, the staff parallel to the ground, but the pale fire still jetted out, brighter than the torches. Men shied away, held up hands to shield their eyes from the pain of that brilliance.

"Is this what Aemon's blood has come to?" The Aes Sedai's voice was not loud, but it overwhelmed every other sound. "Little people squabbling for the right to hide like rabbits? You have forgotten who you were, forgotten what you were, but I had hoped some small part was left, some memory in blood and bone. Some shred to steel you for the long night coming."

No one spoke. The two Coplins looked as if they never wanted to open their mouths again.

Bran said, "Forgotten who we were? We are who we always have been. Honest farmers and shepherds and craftsmen. Two Rivers folk."

"To the south," Moiraine said, "lies the river you call the White River, but far to the east of here men call it still by its rightful name. Manetherendrelle. In the Old Tongue, Waters of the Mountain Home. Sparkling waters that once coursed through a land of bravery and beauty. Two thousand years ago Manetherendrelle flowed by the walls of a mountain city so lovely to behold that Ogier stonemasons came to stare in wonder. Farms and villages covered this region, and that you call the Forest of Shadows, as well, and beyond. But all of those folk thought of themselves as the people of the Mountain Home, the people of Manetheren."

"Their King was Aemon al Caar al Thorin, Aemon son of Caar son of Thorin, and Eldrene ay Ellan ay Carlan was his Queen. Aemon, a man so fearless that the greatest compliment for courage any could give, even among his enemies, was to say a man had Aemon's heart. Eldrene, so beautiful that it was said the flowers bloomed to make her smile. Bravery and beauty and wisdom and a love that death could not sunder. Weep, if you have a heart, for the loss of them, for the loss of even their memory. Weep, for the loss of their blood."

She fell silent then, but no one spoke. Rand was as bound as the others in the spell she had created. When she spoke again, he drank it in, and so did the rest.

"For nearly two centuries the Trolloc Wars had ravaged the length and breadth of the world, and wherever battles raged, the Red Eagle banner of Manetheren was in the forefront. The men of Manetheren were a thorn to the Dark One's foot and a bramble to his hand. Sing of Manetheren, that would never bend knee to the Shadow. Sing of Manetheren, the sword that could not be broken."

"They were far away, the men of Manetheren, on the Field of Bekkar, called the Field of Blood, when news came that a Trolloc army was moving against their home. Too far to do else but wait to hear of their land's death, for the forces of the Dark One meant to make an end of them. Kill the mighty oak by hacking away its roots. Too far to do else but mourn. But they were the men of the Mountain Home."

"Without hesitation, without thought for the distance they must travel, they marched from the very field of victory, still covered in dust and sweat and blood. Day and night they marched, for they had seen the horror a Trolloc army left behind it, and no man of them could sleep while such a danger threatened Manetheren. They moved as if their feet had wings,

marching further and faster than friends hoped or enemies feared they could. At any other day that march alone would have inspired songs. When the Dark One's armies swooped down upon the lands of Manetheren, the men of the Mountain Home stood before it, with their backs to the Tarendrelle."

Some villager raised a small cheer then, but Moiraine kept on as if she had not heard. "The host that faced the men of Manetheren was enough to daunt the bravest heart. Ravens blackened the sky; Trollocs blackened the land. Trollocs and their human allies. Trollocs and Darkfriends in tens of tens of thousands, and Dreadlords to command. At night their cook-fires outnumbered the stars, and dawn revealed the banner of Ba'alzamon at their head. Ba'alzamon, Heart of the Dark. An ancient name for the Father of Lies. The Dark One could not have been free of his prison at Shayol Ghul, for if he had been, not all the forces of humankind together could have stood against him, but there was power there. Dreadlords, and some evil that made that light-destroying banner seem no more than right and sent a chill into the souls of the men who faced it.

"Yet, they knew what they must do. Their homeland lay just across the river. They must keep that host, and the power with it, from the Mountain Home. Aemon had sent out messengers. Aid was promised if they could hold for but three days at the Tarendrelle. Hold for three days against odds that should overwhelm them in the first hour. Yet somehow, through bloody assault and desperate defense, they held through an hour, and the second hour, and the third. For three days they fought, and though the land became a butcher's yard, no crossing of the Tarendrelle did they yield. By the third night no help had come, and no messengers, and they fought on alone. For six days. For nine. And on the tenth day Aemon knew the bitter taste of betrayal. No help was coming, and they could hold the river crossings no more."

"What did they do?" Hari demanded. Torchfires flickered in the chill night breeze, but no one made a move to draw a cloak tighter.

"Aemon crossed the Tarendrelle," Moiraine told them, "destroying the bridges behind him. And he sent word throughout his land for the people to flee, for he knew the powers with the Trolloc horde would find a way to bring it across the river. Even as the word went out, the Trolloc crossing began, and the soldiers of Manetheren took up the fight again, to buy with their lives what hours they could for their people to escape. From the city of Manetheren, Eldrene organized the flight of her people into the deepest forests and the fastness of the mountains.

"But some did not flee. First in a trickle, then a river, then a flood, men went, not to safety, but to join the army fighting for their land. Shepherds with bows, and farmers with pitchforks, and woodsmen with axes. Women went, too, shouldering what weapons they could find and marching side by side with their men. No one made that journey who did not know they would never return. But it was their land. It had been their fathers', and it would be their children's, and they went to pay the price of it. Not a step of ground was given up until it was soaked in blood, but at the last the army of Manetheren was driven back, back to here, to this place you now call Emond's Field. And here the Trolloc hordes surrounded them."

Her voice held the sound of cold tears. "Trolloc dead and the corpses of human renegades piled up in mounds, but always more scrambled over those charnel heaps in waves of death that had no end. There could be but one finish. No man or woman who had stood beneath the banner of the Red Eagle at that day's dawning still lived when night fell. The sword that could not be broken was shattered.

"In the Mountains of Mist, alone in the emptied city of Manetheren, Eldrene felt Aemon die, and her heart died with him. And where her heart had been was left only a thirst for vengeance, vengeance for her love, vengeance for her people and her land. Driven by grief she reached out to the True Source, and hurled the One Power at the Trolloc army. And there the Dreadlords died wherever they stood, whether in their secret councils or exhorting their soldiers. In the passing of a breath the Dreadlords and the generals of the Dark One's host burst into flame. Fire consumed their bodies, and terror consumed their just-victorious army.

"Now they ran like beasts before a wildfire in the forest, with no thought for anything but escape. North and south they fled. Thousands drowned attempting to cross the Tarendrelle without the aid of the Dreadlords, and at the Manetherendrelle they tore down the bridges in their fright at what might be following them. Where they found people, they slew and burned, but to flee was the need that gripped them. Until, at last, no one of them remained in the lands of Manetheren. They were dispersed like dust before the whirlwind. The final vengeance came more slowly, but it came, when they were hunted down by other peoples, by other armies in other lands. None was left alive of those who did murder at Aemon's Field.

"But the price was high for Manetheren. Eldrene had drawn to herself more of the One Power than any human could ever hope to wield unaided. As the enemy generals died, so did she die, and the fires that consumed her

consumed the empty city of Manetheren, even the stones of it, down to the living rock of the mountains. Yet the people had been saved.

"Nothing was left of their farms, their villages, or their great city. Some would say there was nothing left for them, nothing but to flee to other lands, where they could begin anew. They did not say so. They had paid such a price in blood and hope for their land as had never been paid before, and now they were bound to that soil by ties stronger than steel. Other wars would wrack them in years to come, until at last their corner of the world was forgotten and at last they had forgotten wars and the ways of war. Never again did Manetheren rise. Its soaring spires and splashing fountains became as a dream that slowly faded from the minds of its people. But they, and their children, and their children's children, held the land that was theirs. They held it when the long centuries had washed the why of it from their memories. They held it until, today, there is you. Weep for Manetheren. Weep for what is lost forever."

The fires on Moiraine's staff winked out, and she lowered it to her side as if it weighed a hundred pounds. For a long moment the moan of the wind was the only sound. Then Paet al'Caar shouldered past the Coplins.

"I don't know about your story," the long-jawed farmer said. "I'm no thorn to the Dark One's foot, nor ever likely to be, neither. But my Wil is walking because of you, and for that I am ashamed to be here. I don't know if you can forgive me, but whether you will or no, I'll be going. And for me, you can stay in Emond's Field as long as you like."

With a quick duck of his head, almost a bow, he pushed back through the crowd. Others began to mutter then, offering shamefaced penitence before they, too, slipped away one by one. The Coplins, sour-mouthed and scowling once more, looked at the faces around them and vanished into the night without a word. Bili Congar had disappeared even before his cousins.

Lan pulled Rand back and shut the door. "Let's go, boy." The Warder started for the back of the inn. "Come along, both of you. Quickly!"

Rand hesitated, exchanging a wondering glance with Mat. While Moiraine had been telling the story, Master al'Vere's Dhurran's could not have dragged him away, but now something else held his feet. This was the real beginning, leaving the inn and following the Warder into the night. . . . He shook himself, and tried to firm his resolve. He had no choice but to go, but he would come back to Emond's Field, however far or long this journey was.

“What are you waiting for?” Lan asked from the door that led out of the back of the common room. With a start Mat hurried to him.

Trying to convince himself that he was beginning a grand adventure, Rand followed them through the darkened kitchen and out into the stableyard.





# CHAPTER

## 10

---



### *Leavetaking*

A single lantern, its shutters half closed, hung from a nail on a stall post, casting a dim light. Deep shadows swallowed most of the stalls. As Rand came through the doors from the stableyard, hard on the heels of Mat and the Warder, Perrin leaped up in a rustle of straw from where he had been sitting with his back against a stall door. A heavy cloak swathed him.

Lan barely paused to demand, "Did you look the way I told you, blacksmith?"

"I looked," Perrin replied. "There's nobody here but us. Why would anybody hide—"

"Care and a long life go together, blacksmith." The Warder ran a quick eye around the shadowed stable and the deeper shadows of the hayloft above, then shook his head. "No time," he muttered, half to himself. "Hurry, she says."

As if to suit his words, he strode quickly to where the five horses stood tethered, bridled and saddled at the back of the pool of light. Two were the black stallion and white mare that Rand had seen before. The others, if not quite so tall or so sleek, certainly appeared to be among the best the Two Rivers had to offer. With hasty care Lan began examining cinches and girth straps, and the leather ties that held saddlebags, water-skins, and blanketrolls behind the saddles.

Rand exchanged shaky smiles with his friends, trying hard to look as if he really was eager to be off.

For the first time Mat noticed the sword at Rand's waist, and pointed to it. "You becoming a Warder?" He laughed, then swallowed it with a quick glance at Lan. The Warder apparently took no notice. "Or at least a merchant's guard," Mat went on with a grin that seemed only a little forced. He hefted his bow. "An honest man's weapon isn't good enough for him."

Rand thought about flourishing the sword, but Lan being there stopped him. The Warder was not even looking in his direction, but he was sure the man was aware of everything that went on around him. Instead he said with exaggerated casualness, "It might be useful," as if wearing a sword were nothing out of the ordinary.

Perrin moved, trying to hide something under his cloak. Rand glimpsed a wide leather belt encircling the apprentice blacksmith's waist, with the handle of an axe thrust through a loop on the belt.

"What do you have there?" he asked.

"Merchant's guard, indeed," Mat hooted.

The shaggy-haired youth gave Mat a frown that suggested he had already had more than his fair share of joking, then sighed heavily and tossed back his cloak to uncover the axe. It was no common woodsman's tool. A broad half-moon blade on one side of the head and a curved spike on the other made it every bit as strange for the Two Rivers as Rand's sword. Perrin's hand rested on it with a sense of familiarity, though.

"Master Luhhan made it about two years ago, for a wool-buyer's guard. But when it was done the fellow wouldn't pay what he had agreed, and Master Luhhan would not take less. He gave it to me when"—he cleared his throat, then shot Rand the same warning frown he'd given Mat—"when he found me practicing with it. He said I might as well have it since he couldn't make anything useful from it."

"Practicing," Mat snickered, but held up his hands soothingly when Perrin raised his head. "As you say. It's just as well one of us knows how to use a real weapon."

"That bow is a real weapon," Lan said suddenly. He propped an arm across the saddle of his tall black and regarded them gravely. "So are the slings I've seen you village boys with. Just because you never used them for anything but hunting rabbits or chasing a wolf away from the sheep makes no difference. Anything can be a weapon, if the man or woman who holds it has the nerve and will to make it so. Trollocs aside, you had better have

that clear in your minds before we leave the Two Rivers, before we leave Emond's Field, if you want to reach Tar Valon alive."

His face and voice, cold as death and hard as a rough-hewn gravestone, stifled their smiles and their tongues. Perrin grimaced and pulled his cloak back over the axe. Mat stared at his feet and stirred the straw on the stable floor with his toe. The Warder grunted and went back to his checking, and the silence lengthened.

"It isn't much like the stories," Mat said, finally.

"I don't know," Perrin said sourly. "Trollocs, a Warder, an Aes Sedai. What more could you ask?"

"Aes Sedai," Mat whispered, sounding as if he were suddenly cold.

"Do you believe her, Rand?" Perrin asked. "I mean, what would Trollocs want with us?"

As one, they glanced at the Warder. Lan appeared absorbed in the white mare's saddle girth, but the three of them moved back toward the stable door, away from Lan. Even so, they huddled together and spoke softly.

Rand shook his head. "I don't know, but she had it right about our farms being the only ones attacked. And they attacked Master Luhhan's house and the forge first, here in the village. I asked the Mayor. It's as easy to believe they are after us as anything else I can think of." Suddenly he realized they were both staring at him.

"You asked the Mayor?" Mat said incredulously. "She said not to tell anybody."

"I didn't tell him why I was asking," Rand protested. "Do you mean you didn't talk to anybody at all? You didn't let anybody know you're going?"

Perrin shrugged defensively. "Moiraine Sedai said not anybody."

"We left notes," Mat said. "For our families. They'll find them in the morning. Rand, my mother thinks Tar Valon is the next thing to Shayol Ghul." He gave a little laugh to show he did not share her opinion. It was not very convincing. "She'd try to lock me in the cellar if she believed I was even thinking of going there."

"Master Luhhan is stubborn as stone," Perrin added, "and Mistress Luhhan is worse. If you'd seen her digging through what's left of the house, saying she hoped the Trollocs did come back so she could get her hands on them. . . ."

"Burn me, Rand," Mat said, "I know she's an Aes Sedai and all, but the Trollocs were really here. She said not to tell anybody. If an Aes Sedai doesn't know what to do about something like this, who does?"

"I don't know." Rand rubbed at his forehead. His head hurt; he could not get that dream out of his mind. "My father believes her. At least, he agreed that we had to go."

Suddenly Moiraine was in the doorway. "You talked to your father about this journey?" She was clothed in dark gray from head to foot, with a skirt divided for riding astride, and the serpent ring was the only gold she wore now.

Rand eyed her walking staff; despite the flames he had seen, there was no sign of charring, or even soot. "I couldn't go off without letting him know."

She eyed him for a moment with pursed lips before turning to the others. "And did you also decide that a note was not enough?" Mat and Perrin talked on top of each other, assuring her they had only left notes, the way she had said. Nodding, she waved them to silence, and gave Rand a sharp look. "What is done is already woven in the Pattern. Lan?"

"The horses are ready," the Warder said, "and we have enough provisions to reach Baerlon with some to spare. We can leave at any time. I suggest now."

"Not without me." Egwene slipped into the stable, a shawl-wrapped bundle in her arms. Rand nearly fell over his own feet.

Lan's sword had come half out of its sheath; when he saw who it was he shoved the blade back, his eyes suddenly flat. Perrin and Mat began babbling to convince Moiraine they had not told Egwene about leaving. The Aes Sedai ignored them; she simply looked at Egwene, tapping her lips thoughtfully with one finger.

The hood of Egwene's dark brown cloak was pulled up, but not enough to hide the defiant way she faced Moiraine. "I have everything I need here. Including food. And I will not be left behind. I'll probably never get another chance to see the world outside the Two Rivers."

"This isn't a picnic trip into the Waterwood, Egwene," Mat growled. He stepped back when she looked at him from under lowered brows.

"Thank you, Mat. I wouldn't have known. Do you think you three are the only ones who want to see what's outside? I've dreamed about it as long as you have, and I don't intend to miss this chance."

"How did you find out we were leaving?" Rand demanded. "Anyway, you can't go with us. We aren't leaving for the fun of it. The Trollocs are after us." She gave him a tolerant look, and he flushed and stiffened indignantly.

"First," she told him patiently, "I saw Mat creeping about, trying hard

not to be noticed. Then I saw Perrin attempting to hide that absurd great axe under his cloak. I knew Lan had bought a horse, and it suddenly occurred to me to wonder why he needed another. And if he could buy one, he could buy others. Putting that with Mat and Perrin sneaking about like bull calves pretending to be foxes . . . well, I could see only one answer. I don't know if I'm surprised or not to find you here, Rand, after all your talk about daydreams. With Mat and Perrin involved, I suppose I should have known you would be in it, too."

"I have to go, Egwene," Rand said. "All of us do, or the Trollocs will come back."

"The Trollocs!" Egwene laughed incredulously. "Rand, if you've decided to see some of the world, well and good, but please spare me any of your nonsensical tales."

"It's true," Perrin said as Mat began, "The Trollocs—"

"Enough," Moiraine said quietly, but it cut their talk as sharply as a knife. "Did anyone else notice all of this?" Her voice was soft, but Egwene swallowed and drew herself up before answering.

"After last night, all they can think about is rebuilding, that and what to do if it happens again. They couldn't see anything else unless it was pushed under their noses. And I told no one what I suspected. No one."

"Very well," Moiraine said after a moment. "You may come with us."

A startled expression darted across Lan's face. It was gone in an instant, leaving him outwardly calm, but furious words erupted from him. "No, Moiraine!"

"It is part of the Pattern, now, Lan."

"It is ridiculous!" he retorted. "There's no reason for her to come along, and every reason for her not to."

"There *is* a reason for it," Moiraine said calmly. "A part of the Pattern, Lan." The Warder's stony face showed nothing, but he nodded slowly.

"But, Egwene," Rand said, "the Trollocs will be chasing us. We won't be safe until we get to Tar Valon."

"Don't try to frighten me off," she said. "I am going."

Rand knew that tone of voice. He had not heard it since she decided that climbing the tallest trees was for children, but he remembered it well. "If you think being chased by Trollocs will be fun," he began, but Moiraine interrupted.

"We have no time for this. We must be as far away as possible by daybreak. If she is left behind, Rand, she could rouse the village before we have gone a mile, and that would surely warn the Myrddraal."

"I would not do that," Egwene protested.

"She can ride the gleeman's horse," the Warder said. "I'll leave him enough to buy another."

"That will not be possible," came Thom Merrillin's resonant voice from the hayloft. Lan's sword left its sheath this time, and he did not put it back as he stared up at the gleeman.

Thom tossed down a blanketroll, then slung his cased flute and harp across his back and shouldered bulging saddlebags. "This village has no use for me, now, while on the other hand, I have never performed in Tar Valon. And though I usually journey alone, after last night I have no objections at all to traveling in company."

The Warder gave Perrin a hard look, and Perrin shifted uncomfortably. "I didn't think of looking in the loft," he muttered.

As the long-limbed gleeman scrambled down the ladder from the loft, Lan spoke, stiffly formal. "Is this part of the Pattern, too, Moiraine Sedai?"

"Everything is a part of the Pattern, my old friend," Moiraine replied softly. "We cannot pick and choose. But we shall see."

Thom put his feet on the stable floor and turned from the ladder, brushing straw from his patch-covered cloak. "In fact," he said in more normal tones, "you might say that I insist on traveling in company. I have given many hours over many mugs of ale to thinking of how I might end my days. A Trolloc's cookpot was not one of the thoughts." He looked askance at the Warder's sword. "There's no need for that. I am not a cheese for slicing."

"Master Merrillin," Moiraine said, "we must go quickly, and almost certainly in great danger. The Trollocs are still out there, and we go by night. Are you sure that you want to travel with us?"

Thom eyed the lot of them with a quizzical smile. "If it is not too dangerous for the girl, it can't be too dangerous for me. Besides, what gleeman would not face a little danger to perform in Tar Valon?"

Moiraine nodded, and Lan scabbarded his sword. Rand suddenly wondered what would have happened if Thom had changed his mind, or if Moiraine had not nodded. The gleeman began saddling his horse as if similar thoughts had never crossed his mind, but Rand noticed that he eyed Lan's sword more than once.

"Now," Moiraine said. "What horse for Egwene?"

"The peddler's horses are as bad as the Dhurrans," the Warder replied sourly. "Strong, but slow plodders."

"Bela," Rand said, getting a look from Lan that made him wish he had kept silent. But he knew he could not dissuade Egwene; the only thing left

was to help. "Bela may not be as fast as the others, but she's strong. I ride her sometimes. She can keep up."

Lan looked into Bela's stall, muttering under his breath. "She might be a little better than the others," he said finally. "I don't suppose there is any other choice."

"Then she will have to do," Moiraine said. "Rand, find a saddle for Bela. Quickly, now! We have tarried too long already."

Rand hurriedly chose a saddle and blanket in the tack room, then fetched Bela from her stall. The mare looked back at him in sleepy surprise when he put the saddle on her back. When he rode her, it was barebacked; she was not used to a saddle. He made soothing noises while he tightened the girth strap, and she accepted the oddity with no more than a shake of her mane.

Taking Egwene's bundle from her, he tied it on behind the saddle while she mounted and adjusted her skirts. They were not divided for riding astride, so her wool stockings were bared to the knee. She wore the same soft leather shoes as all the other village girls. They were not at all suited for journeying to Watch Hill, much less Tar Valon.

"I still think you shouldn't come," he said. "I wasn't making it up about the Trollocs. But I promise I will take care of you."

"Perhaps I'll take care of you," she replied lightly. At his exasperated look she smiled and bent down to smooth his hair. "I know you'll look after me, Rand. We will look after each other. But now you had better look after getting on your horse."

All of the others were already mounted and waiting for him, he realized. The only horse left riderless was Cloud, a tall gray with a black mane and tail that belonged to Jon Thane, or had. He scrambled into the saddle, though not without difficulty as the gray tossed his head and pranced sideways as Rand put his foot in the stirrup, and his scabbard caught in his legs. It was not chance that his friends had not chosen Cloud. Master Thane often raced the spirited gray against merchants' horses, and Rand had never known him to lose, but he had never known Cloud to give anyone an easy ride, either. Lan must have given a huge price to make the miller sell. As he settled in the saddle Cloud's dancing increased, as if the gray were eager to run. Rand gripped the reins firmly and tried to think that he would have no trouble. Perhaps if he convinced himself, he could convince the horse, too.

An owl hooted in the night outside, and the village people jumped before they realized what it was. They laughed nervously and exchanged shamefaced looks.

"Next thing, field mice will chase us up a tree," Egwene said with an unsteady chuckle.

Lan shook his head. "Better if it had been wolves."

"Wolves!" Perrin exclaimed, and the Warder favored him with a flat stare.

"Wolves don't like Trollocs, blacksmith, and Trollocs don't like wolves, or dogs, either. If I heard wolves I would be sure there were no Trollocs waiting out there for us." He moved into the moonlit night, walking his tall black slowly.

Moiraine rode after him without a moment's hesitation, and Egwene kept hard to the Aes Sedai's side. Rand and the gleeman brought up the rear, following Mat and Perrin.

The back of the inn was dark and silent, and dappled moon shadows filled the stableyard. The soft thuds of the hooves faded quickly, swallowed by the night. In the darkness the Warder's cloak made him a shadow, too. Only the need to let him lead the way kept the others from clustering around him. Getting out of the village without being seen was going to be no easy task, Rand decided as he neared the gate. At least, without being seen by villagers. Many windows in the village emitted pale yellow light, and although those glows seemed very small in the night now, shapes moved frequently within them, the shapes of villagers watching to see what this night brought. No one wanted to be caught by surprise again.

In the deep shadows beside the inn, just on the point of leaving the stableyard, Lan abruptly halted, motioning sharply for silence.

Boots rattled on the Wagon Bridge, and here and there on the bridge moonlight glinted off metal. The boots clattered across the bridge, grated on gravel, and approached the inn. No sound at all came from those in the shadow. Rand suspected his friends, at least, were too frightened to make a noise. Like him.

The footsteps halted before the inn in the grayness just beyond the dim light from the common-room windows. It was not until Jon Thane stepped forward, a spear propped on his stout shoulder, an old jerkin sewn all over with steel disks straining across his chest, that Rand saw them for what they were. A dozen men from the village and the surrounding farms, some in helmets or pieces of armor that had lain dust-covered in attics for generations, all with a spear or a woodaxe or a rusty bill.

The miller peered into a common-room window, then turned with a curt, "It looks right here." The others formed in two ragged ranks behind



him, and the patrol marched into the night as if stepping to three different drums.

"Two Dha'vol Trollocs would have them all for breakfast," Lan muttered when the sound of their boots had faded, "but they have eyes and ears." He turned his stallion back. "Come."

Slowly, quietly, the Warder took them back across the stableyard, down the bank through the willows and into the Winespring Water. So close to the Winespring itself the cold, swift water, gleaming as it swirled around the horses' legs, was deep enough to lap against the soles of the riders' boots.

Climbing out on the far bank, the line of horses wound its way under the Warder's deft direction, keeping away from any of the village houses. From time to time Lan stopped, signing them all to be quiet, though no one else heard or saw anything. Each time he did, however, another patrol of villagers and farmers soon passed. Slowly they moved toward the north edge of the village.

Rand peered at the high-peaked houses in the dark, trying to impress them on his memory. *A fine adventurer I am*, he thought. He was not even out of the village yet, and already he was homesick. But he did not stop looking.

They passed beyond the last farmhouses on the outskirts of the village and into the countryside, paralleling the North Road that led to Taren Ferry. Rand thought that surely no night sky elsewhere could be as beautiful as the Two Rivers sky. The clear black seemed to reach to forever, and myriad stars gleamed like points of light scattered through crystal. The moon, only a thin slice less than full, appeared almost close enough to touch, if he stretched, and. . . .

A black shape flew slowly across the silvery ball of the moon. Rand's involuntary jerk on the reins halted the gray. A bat, he thought weakly, but he knew it was not. Bats were a common sight of an evening, darting after flies and bitemes in the twilight. The wings that carried this creature might have the same shape, but they moved with the slow, powerful sweep of a bird of prey. And it was hunting. The way it cast back and forth in long arcs left no doubt of that. Worst of all was the size. For a bat to seem so large against the moon it would have had to be almost within arm's reach. He tried to judge in his mind how far away it must be, and how big. The body of it had to be as large as a man, and the wings. . . . It crossed the face of the moon again, wheeling suddenly downward to be engulfed by the night.

He did not realize that Lan had ridden back to him until the Warder caught his arm. "What are you sitting here and staring at, boy? We have to keep moving." The others waited behind Lan.

Half expecting to be told he was letting fear of the Trollocs overcome his sense, Rand told what he had seen. He hoped that Lan would dismiss it as a bat, or a trick of his eyes.

Lan growled a word, sounding as if it left a bad taste in his mouth. "Draghkar." Egwene and the other Two Rivers folk stared at the sky nervously in all directions, but the gleeman groaned softly.

"Yes," Moiraine said. "It is too much to hope otherwise. And if the Myrddraal has a Draghkar at his command, then he will soon know where we are, if he does not already. We must move more quickly than we can cross-country. We may still reach Taren Ferry ahead of the Myrddraal, and he and his Trollocs will not cross as easily as we."

"A Draghkar?" Egwene said. "What is it?"

It was Thom Merrill who answered her hoarsely. "In the war that ended the Age of Legends, worse than Trollocs and Halfmen were created."

Moiraine's head jerked toward him as he spoke. Not even the dark could hide the sharpness of her look.

Before anyone could ask the gleeman for more, Lan began giving directions. "We take to the North Road, now. For your lives, follow my lead, keep up and keep together."

He wheeled his horse about, and the others galloped wordlessly after him.



# CHAPTER

## 11

---



### *The Road to Taren Ferry*

On the hard-packed dirt of the North Road the horses stretched out, manes and tails streaming back in the moonlight as they raced northward, hooves pounding a steady rhythm. Lan led the way, black horse and shadow-clad rider all but invisible in the cold night. Moiraine's white mare, matching the stallion stride for stride, was a pale dart speeding through the dark. The rest followed in a tight line, as if they were all tied to a rope with one end in the Warder's hands.

Rand galloped last in line, with Thom Merrilin just ahead and the others less distinct beyond. The gleeman never turned his head, reserving his eyes for where they ran, not what they ran from. If Trollocs appeared behind, or the Fade on its silent horse, or that flying creature, the Draghkar, it would be up to Rand to sound an alarm.

Every few minutes he craned his neck to peer behind while he clung to Cloud's mane and reins. The Draghkar. . . . Worse than Trollocs and Fades, Thom had said. But the sky was empty, and only darkness and shadows met his eyes on the ground. Shadows that could hide an army.

Now that the gray had been let loose to run, the animal sped through the night like a ghost, easily keeping pace with Lan's stallion. And Cloud wanted to go faster. He wanted to catch the black, strained to catch the black. Rand had to keep a firm hand on the reins to hold him back. Cloud lunged against his restraint as if the gray thought this were a race, fighting

him for mastery with every stride. Rand clung to saddle and reins with every muscle taut. Fervently he hoped his mount did not detect how uneasy he was. If Cloud did, he would lose the one real edge he held, however precariously.

Lying low on Cloud's neck, Rand kept a worried eye on Bela and on her rider. When he had said the shaggy mare could stay with the others, he had not meant on the run. She kept up now only by running as he had not thought she could. Lan had not wanted Egwene in their number. Would he slow for her if Bela began to flag? Or would he try to leave her behind? The Aes Sedai and the Warder thought Rand and his friends were important in some way, but for all of Moiraine's talk of the Pattern, he did not think they included Egwene in that importance.

If Bela fell back, he would fall back, too, whatever Moiraine and Lan had to say about it. Back where the Fade and the Trollocs were. Back where the Draghkar was. With all his heart and desperation he silently shouted at Bela to run like the wind, silently tried to will strength into her. *Run!* His skin prickled, and his bones felt as if they were freezing, ready to split open. *The Light help her, run!* And Bela ran.

On and on they sped, northward into the night, time fading into an indistinct blur. Now and again the lights of farmhouses flashed into sight, then disappeared as quickly as imagination. Dogs' sharp challenges faded swiftly behind, or cut off abruptly as the dogs decided they had been chased away. They raced through darkness relieved only by watery pale moonlight, a darkness where trees along the road loomed up without warning, then were gone. For the rest, murk surrounded them, and only a solitary night-bird's cry, lonely and mournful, disturbed the steady pounding of hooves.

Abruptly Lan slowed, then brought the file of horses to a stop. Rand was not sure how long they had been moving, but a soft ache filled his legs from gripping the saddle. Ahead of them in the night, lights sparkled, as if a tall swarm of fireflies held one place among the trees.

Rand frowned at the lights in puzzlement, then suddenly gasped with surprise. The fireflies were windows, the windows of houses covering the sides and top of a hill. It was Watch Hill. He could hardly believe they had come so far. They had probably made the journey as fast as it had ever been traveled. Following Lan's example, Rand and Thom Merrill dismounted. Cloud stood head down, sides heaving. Lather, almost indistinguishable from the horse's smoky sides, flecked the gray's neck and shoulders. Rand thought that Cloud would not be carrying anyone further that night.

"Much as I would like to put all these villages behind me," Thom announced, "a few hours rest would not go amiss right now. Surely we have enough of a lead to allow that?"

Rand stretched, knuckling the small of his back. "If we're stopping the rest of the night in Watch Hill, we may as well go on up."

A vagrant gust of wind brought a fragment of song from the village, and smells of cooking that made his mouth water. They were still celebrating in Watch Hill. There had been no Trollocs to disturb their Bel Tine. He looked for Egwene. She was leaning against Bela, slumped with weariness. The others were climbing down as well, with many a sigh and much stretching of aching muscles. Only the Warder and the Aes Sedai showed no visible sign of fatigue.

"I could do with some singing," Mat put in tiredly. "And maybe a hot mutton pie at the White Boar." Pausing, he added, "I've never been further than Watch Hill. The White Boar's not nearly as good as the Winespring Inn."

"The White Boar isn't so bad," Perrin said. "A mutton pie for me, too. And lots of hot tea to take the chill off my bones."

"We cannot stop until we are across the Taren," Lan said sharply. "Not for more than a few minutes."

"But the horses," Rand protested. "We'll run them to death if we try to go any further tonight. Moiraine Sedai, surely you—"

He had vaguely noticed her moving among the horses, but he had not paid any real attention to what she did. Now she brushed past him to lay her hands on Cloud's neck. Rand fell silent. Suddenly the horse tossed his head with a soft whicker, nearly pulling the reins from Rand's hands. The gray danced a step sideways, as restive as if he had spent a week in a stable. Without a word Moiraine went to Bela.

"I did not know she could do that," Rand said softly to Lan, his cheeks hot.

"You, of all people, should have suspected it," the Warder replied. "You watched her with your father. She will wash all the fatigue away. First from the horses, then from the rest of you."

"The rest of us. Not you?"

"Not me, sheepherder. I don't need it, not yet. And not her. What she can do for others, she cannot do for herself. Only one of us will ride tired. You had better hope she does not grow too tired before we reach Tar Valon."

"Too tired for what?" Rand asked the Warder.

"You were right about your Bela, Rand," Moiraine said from where she

stood by the mare. "She has a good heart, and as much stubbornness as the rest of you Two Rivers folk. Strange as it seems, she may be the least weary of all."

A scream ripped the darkness, a sound like a man dying under sharp knives, and wings swooped low above the party. The night deepened in the shadow that swept over them. With panicked cries the horses reared wildly.

The wind of the Draghkar's wings beat at Rand with a feel like the touch of slime, like chittering in the dank dimness of a nightmare. He had no time even to feel the fear of it, for Cloud exploded into the air with a scream of his own, twisting desperately as if attempting to shake off some clinging thing. Rand, hanging onto the reins, was jerked off his feet and dragged across the ground, Cloud screaming as though the big gray felt wolves tearing at his hocks.

Somehow he maintained his grip on the reins; using the other hand as much as his legs he scrambled onto his feet, taking leaping, staggering steps to keep from being pulled down again. His breath came in ragged pants of desperation. He could not let Cloud get away. He threw out a frantic hand, barely catching the bridle. Cloud reared, lifting him into the air; Rand clung helplessly, hoping against hope that the horse would quieten.

The shock of landing jarred Rand to his teeth, but suddenly the gray was still, nostrils flaring and eyes rolling, stiff-legged and trembling. Rand was trembling as well, and all but hanging from the bridle. *That jolt must have shaken the fool animal, too*, he thought. He took three or four deep, shaky breaths. Only then could he look around and see what had happened to the others.

Chaos reigned among the party. They clutched reins against jerking heads, trying with little success to calm the rearing horses that dragged them about in a milling mass. Only two seemingly had no trouble at all with their mounts. Moiraine sat straight in her saddle, the white mare stepping delicately away from the confusion as if nothing at all out of the ordinary had happened. On foot, Lan scanned the sky, sword in one hand and reins in the other; the sleek black stallion stood quietly beside him.

Sounds of merrymaking no longer came from Watch Hill. Those in the village must have heard the cry, too. Rand knew they would listen awhile, and perhaps watch for what had caused it, then return to their jollity. They would soon forget the incident, its memory submerged by song and food and dance and fun. Perhaps when they heard the news of what had happened in Emond's Field some would remember, and wonder. A

fiddle began to play, and after a moment a flute joined in. The village was resuming its celebration.

"Mount!" Lan commanded curtly. Sheathing his sword, he leaped onto the stallion. "The Draghkar would not have showed itself unless it had already reported our whereabouts to the Myrddraal." Another strident shriek drifted down from far above, fainter but no less harsh. The music from Watch Hill silenced raggedly once more. "It tracks us now, marking us for the Halfman. He won't be far."

The horses, fresh now as well as fear-struck, pranced and backed away from those trying to mount. A cursing Thom Merrillin was the first into his saddle, but the others were up soon after. All but one.

"Hurry, Rand!" Egwene shouted. The Draghkar gave shrill voice once more, and Bela ran a few steps before she could rein the mare in. "Hurry!"

With a start Rand realized that instead of trying to mount Cloud he had been standing there staring at the sky in a vain attempt to locate the source of those vile shrieks. More, all unaware, he had drawn Tam's sword as if to fight the flying thing.

His face reddened, making him glad for the night to hide him. Awkwardly, with one hand occupied by the reins, he re-sheathed the blade, glancing hastily at the others. Moiraine, Lan, and Egwene all were looking at him, though he could not be sure how much they could see in the moonlight. The rest seemed too absorbed with keeping their horses under control to pay him any mind. He put a hand on the pommel and reached the saddle in one leap, as if he had been doing the like all his life. If any of his friends had noticed the sword, he would surely hear about it later. There would be time enough to worry about it then.

As soon as he was in the saddle they were all off at a gallop again, up the road and by the dome-like hill. Dogs barked in the village; their passage was not entirely unnoticed. *Or maybe the dogs smelled Trollocs*, Rand thought. The barking and the village lights alike vanished quickly behind them.

They galloped in a knot, horses all but jostling together as they ran. Lan ordered them to spread out again, but no one wanted to be even a little alone in the night. A scream came from high overhead. The Warder gave up and let them run clustered.

Rand was close behind Moiraine and Lan, the gray straining in an effort to force himself between the Warder's black and the Aes Sedai's trim mare. Egwene and the gleeman raced on either flank of him, while Rand's friends crowded in behind. Cloud, spurred by the Draghkar's cries, ran

beyond anything Rand could do to slow him even had he wished to, yet the gray could not gain so much as a step on the other two horses.

The Draghkar's shriek challenged the night.

Stout Bela ran with neck outstretched and tail and mane streaming in the wind of her running, matching the larger horses' every stride. *The Aes Sedai must have done something more than simply ridding her of fatigue.*

Egwene's face in the moonlight was smiling in excited delight. Her braid streamed behind like the horses' manes, and the gleam in her eyes was not all from the moon, Rand was sure. His mouth dropped open in surprise, until a swallowed bite set him off into a fit of coughing.

Lan must have asked a question, for Moiraine suddenly shouted over the wind and the pounding of hooves. "I cannot! Most especially not from the back of a galloping horse. They are not easily killed, even when they can be seen. We must run, and hope."

They galloped through a tatter of fog, thin and no higher than the horses' knees. Cloud sped through it in two strides, and Rand blinked, wondering if he had imagined it. Surely the night was too cold for fog. Another patch of ragged gray whisked by them to one side, larger than the first. It had been growing, as if the mist oozed from the ground. Above them, the Draghkar screamed in rage. Fog enveloped the riders for a brief moment and was gone, came again and vanished behind. The icy mist left a chill dampness on Rand's face and hands. Then a wall of pale gray loomed before them, and they were suddenly enshrouded. The thickness of it muffled the sound of their hooves to dullness, and the cries from overhead seemed to come through a wall. Rand could only just make out the shapes of Egwene and Thom Merrilin on either side of him.

Lan did not slow their pace. "There is still only one place we can be going," he called, his voice sounding hollow and directionless.

"Myrddraal are sly," Moiraine replied. "I will use its own slyness against it." They galloped on silently.

Slaty mist obscured both sky and ground, so that the riders, themselves turned to shadow, appeared to float through night clouds. Even the legs of their own horses seemed to have vanished.

Rand shifted in his saddle, shrinking away from the icy fog. Knowing that Moiraine could do things, even seeing her do them, was one thing; having those things leave his skin damp was something else again. He realized he was holding his breath, too, and called himself nine kinds of idiot. He could not ride all the way to Taren Ferry without breathing. She had used the One Power on Tam, and he seemed all right. Still, he had to



make himself let that breath go and inhale. The air was heavy, but if colder it was otherwise no different than that on any other foggy night. He told himself that, but he was not sure he believed it.

Lan encouraged them to keep close, now, to stay where each could see the outlines of others in that damp, frosty grayness. Yet the Warder still did not slacken his stallion's dead run. Side by side, Lan and Moiraine led the way through the fog as if they could see clearly what lay ahead. The rest could only trust and follow. And hope.

The shrill cries that had hounded them faded as they galloped, and then were gone, but that gave small comfort. Forest and farmhouses, moon and road were shrouded and hidden. Dogs still barked, hollow and distant in the gray haze, when they passed farms, but there was no other sound save the dull drumming of their horses' hooves. Nothing in that featureless ashen fog changed. Nothing gave any hint of the passage of time except the growing ache in thigh and back.

It had to have been hours, Rand was sure. His hands had clutched his reins until he was not sure he could release them, and he wondered if he would ever walk properly again. He glanced back only once. Shadows in the fog raced behind him, but he could not even be certain of their number. Or even that they really were his friends. The chill and damp soaked through his cloak and coat and shirt, soaked into his bones, so it seemed. Only the rush of air past his face and the gather and stretch of the horse beneath him told him he was moving at all. It must have been hours.

"Slow," Lan called suddenly. "Draw rein."

Rand was so startled that Cloud forced between. Lan and Moiraine, forging ahead for half a dozen strides before he could pull the big gray to a halt and stare.

Houses loomed in the fog on all sides, houses strangely tall to Rand's eye. He had never seen this place before, but he had often heard descriptions. That tallness came from high redstone foundations, necessary when the spring melt in the Mountains of Mist made the Taren overflow its banks. They had reached Taren Ferry.

Lan trotted the black warhorse past him. "Don't be so eager, sheep-herder."

Discomfited, Rand fell into place without explaining as the party moved deeper into the village. His face was hot, and for the moment the fog was welcome.

A lone dog, unseen in the cold mist, barked at them furiously, then ran away. Here and there a light appeared in a window as some early-riser

stirred. Other than the dog, no sound save the muted clops of their horses' hooves disturbed the last hour of the night.

Rand had met few people from Taren Ferry. He tried to recall what little he knew about them. They seldom ventured down into what they called "the lower villages," with their noses up as if they smelled something bad. The few he had met bore strange names, like Hilltop and Stoneboat. One and all, Taren Ferry folk had a reputation for slyness and trickery. If you shook hands with a Taren Ferry man, people said, you counted your fingers afterwards.

Lan and Moiraine stopped before a tall, dark house that looked exactly like any other in the village. Fog swirled around the Warder like smoke as he leaped from his saddle and mounted the stairs that rose to the front door, as high above the street as their heads. At the top of the stairs Lan hammered with his fist on the door.

"I thought he wanted quiet," Mat muttered.

Lan's pounding went on. A light appeared in the window of the next house, and someone shouted angrily, but the Warder kept on with his drumming.

Abruptly the door was flung back by a man in a nightshirt that flapped about his bare ankles. An oil lamp in one hand illumined a narrow face with pointed features. He opened his mouth angrily, then let it stay open as his head swiveled to take in the fog, eyes bulging. "What's this?" he said. "What's this?" Chill gray tendrils curled into the doorway, and he hurriedly stepped back away from them.

"Master Hightower," Lan said. "Just the man I need. We want to cross over on your ferry."

"He never even saw a high tower," Mat snickered. Rand made shushing motions at his friend. The sharp-faced fellow raised his lamp higher and peered down at them suspiciously.

After a minute Master Hightower said crossly, "The ferry goes over in daylight. Not in the night. Not ever. And not in this fog, neither. Come back when the sun's up and the fog's gone."

He started to turn away, but Lan caught his wrist. The ferryman opened his mouth angrily. Gold glinted in the lamplight as the Warder counted out coins one by one into the other's palm. Hightower licked his lips as the coins clinked, and by inches his head moved closer to his hand, as if he could not believe what he was seeing.

"And as much again," Lan said, "when we are safely on the other side. But we leave now."

"Now?" Chewing his lower lip, the ferrety man shifted his feet and peered out at the mist-laden night, then nodded abruptly. "Now it is. Well, let loose my wrist. I have to rouse my haulers. You don't think I pull the ferry across myself, do you?"

"I will wait at the ferry," Lan said flatly. "For a little while." He released his hold on the ferryman.

Master Hightower jerked the handful of coins to his chest and, nodding agreement, hastily shoved the door closed with his hip.



# CHAPTER

# 12

---



## *Across the Taren*

Lan came down the stairs, telling the company to dismount and lead their horses after him through the fog. Again they had to trust that the Warder knew where he was going. The fog swirled around Rand's knees, hiding his feet, obscuring everything more than a yard away. The fog was not as heavy as it had been outside the town, but he could barely make out his companions.

Still no human stirred in the night except for them. A few more windows than before showed a light, but the thick mist turned most of them to dim patches, and as often as not that hazy glow, hanging in the gray, was all that was visible. Other houses, revealing a little more, seemed to float on a sea of cloud or to thrust abruptly out of the mist while their neighbors remained hidden, so that they could have stood alone for miles around.

Rand moved stiffly from the ache of the long ride, wondering if there was any way he could walk the rest of the way to Tar Valon. Not that walking was much better than riding at that moment, of course, but even so his feet were almost the only part of him that was not sore. At least he was used to walking.

Only once did anyone speak loudly enough for Rand to hear clearly. "You must handle it," Moiraine said in answer to something unheard from Lan. "He will remember too much as it is, and no help for it. If I stand out in his thoughts. . . ."

Rand grumpily shifted his now-sodden cloak on his shoulders, keeping close with the others. Mat and Perrin grumbled to themselves, muttering under their breaths, with bitten-off exclamations whenever one stubbed a toe on something unseen. Thom Merrill grumbled, too, words like “hot meal” and “fire” and “mulled wine” reaching Rand, but neither the Warder nor the Aes Sedai took notice. Egwene marched along without a word, her back straight and her head high. It was a somewhat painfully hesitant march, to be sure, for she was as unused to riding as the rest.

She was getting her adventure, he thought glumly, and as long as it lasted he doubted if she would notice little things like fog or damp or cold. There must be a difference in what you saw, it seemed to him, depending on whether you sought adventure or had it forced on you. The stories could no doubt make galloping through a cold fog, with a Draghkar and the Light alone knew what else chasing you, sound thrilling. Egwene might be feeling a thrill; he only felt cold and damp and glad to have a village around him again, even if it was Taren Ferry.

Abruptly he walked into something large and warm in the murk: Lan's stallion. The Warder and Moiraine had stopped, and the rest of the party did the same, patting their mounts as much to comfort themselves as the animals. The fog was a little thinner here, enough for them to see one another more clearly than they had in a long while, but not enough to make out much more. Their feet were still hidden by low billows like gray flood-water. The houses seemed to have all been swallowed.

Cautiously Rand led Cloud forward a little way and was surprised to hear his boots scrape on wooden planks. The ferry landing. He backed up carefully, making the gray back as well. He had heard what the Taren Ferry landing was like—a bridge that led nowhere except to the ferryboat. The Taren was supposed to be wide and deep, with treacherous currents that could pull under the strongest swimmer. Much wider than the Wine-spring Water, he supposed. With the fog added in. . . . It was a relief when he felt dirt under his feet again.

A fierce “Hsst!” from Lan, as sharp as the fog. The Warder gestured at them as he dashed to Perrin's side and threw back the stocky youth's cloak, exposing the great axe. Obediently, if still not understanding, Rand tossed his own cloak over his shoulder to show his sword. As Lan moved swiftly back to his horse, bobbing lights appeared in the mist, and muffled footsteps approached.

Six stolid-faced men in rough clothes followed Master Hightower. The torches they carried burned away a patch of fog around them. When they

stopped, all of the party from Emond's Field could be plainly seen, the lot of them surrounded by a gray wall that seemed thicker for the torchlight reflected from it. The ferryman examined them, his narrow head tilted, nose twitching like a weasel sniffing the breeze for a trap.

Lan leaned against his saddle with apparent casualness, but one hand rested ostentatiously on the long hilt of his sword. There was an air about him of a metal spring, compressed, waiting.

Rand hurriedly copied the Warder's pose—at least insofar as putting his hand on his sword. He did not think he could achieve that deadly-seeming slouch. *They'd probably laugh if I tried.*

Perrin eased his axe in its leather loop and planted his feet deliberately. Mat put a hand to his quiver, though Rand was not sure what condition his bowstring was in after being out in all this damp. Thom Merrill stepped forward grandly and held up one empty hand, turning it slowly. Suddenly he gestured with a flourish, and a dagger twirled between his fingers. The hilt slapped into his palm, and, abruptly nonchalant, he began trimming his fingernails.

A low, delighted laugh floated from Moiraine. Egwene clapped as if watching a performance at Festival, then stopped and looked abashed, though her mouth twitched with a smile just the same.

Hightower seemed far from amused. He stared at Thom, then cleared his throat loudly. "There was mention made of more gold for the crossing." He looked around at them again, a sullen, sly look. "What you gave me before is in a safe place now, hear? It's none of it where you can get at it."

"The rest of the gold," Lan told him, "goes into your hand when we are on the other side." The leather purse hanging at his waist clinked as he gave it a little shake.

For a moment the ferryman's eyes darted, but at last he nodded. "Let's be about it, then," he muttered, and stalked out onto the landing followed by his six helpers. The fog burned away around them as they moved; gray tendrils closed in behind, quickly filling where they had been. Rand hurried to keep up.

The ferry itself was a wooden barge with high sides, boarded by a ramp that could be raised to block off the end. Ropes as thick as a man's wrist ran along each side of it, ropes fastened to massive posts at the end of the landing and disappearing into the night over the river. The ferryman's helpers stuck their torches in iron brackets on the ferry's sides, waited while everyone led their horses aboard, then pulled up the ramp. The deck creaked beneath hooves and shuffling feet, and the ferry shifted with the weight.

Hightower muttered half under his breath, growling for them to keep the horses still and stay to the center, out of the haulers' way. He shouted at his helpers, chivvying them as they readied the ferry to cross, but the men moved at the same reluctant speed whatever he said, and he was half-hearted about it, often cutting off in mid-shout to hold his torch high and peer into the fog. Finally he stopped shouting altogether and went to the bow, where he stood staring into the mist that covered the river. He did not move until one of the haulers touched his arm; then he jumped, glaring.

"What? Oh. You, is it? Ready? About time. Well, man, what are you waiting for?" He waved his arms, heedless of the torch and the way the horses whickered and tried to move back. "Cast off! Give way! Move!" The man slouched off to comply, and Hightower peered once more into the fog ahead, rubbing his free hand uneasily on his coat front.

The ferry lurched as its moorings were loosed and the strong current caught it, then lurched again as the guide-ropes held it. The haulers, three to a side, grabbed hold of the ropes at the front of the ferry and laboriously began walking toward the back, muttering uneasily as they edged out onto the gray-cloaked river.

The landing disappeared as mist surrounded them, tenuous streamers drifting across the ferry between the flickering torches. The barge rocked slowly in the current. Nothing except the steady tread of the haulers, forward to take hold of the ropes and back down again pulling, gave a hint of any other movement. No one spoke. The villagers kept as close to the center of the ferry as they could. They had heard the Taren was far wider than the streams they were used to; the fog made it infinitely vaster in their minds.

After a time Rand moved closer to Lan. Rivers a man could not wade or swim or even see across were nervous-making to someone who had never seen anything broader or deeper than a Waterwood pond. "Would they really have tried to rob us?" he asked quietly. "He acted more as if he were afraid we would rob him."

The Warder eyed the ferryman and his helpers—none appeared to be listening—before answering just as softly. "With the fog to hide them . . . well, when what they do is hidden, men sometimes deal with strangers in ways they wouldn't if there were other eyes to see. And the quickest to harm a stranger are the soonest to think a stranger will harm them. This fellow . . . I believe he might sell his mother to Trollocs for stew meat if the price was right. I'm a little surprised you ask. I heard the way people in Emond's Field speak of those from Taren Ferry."

"Yes, but. . . Well, everyone says they. . . But I never thought they would actually. . ." Rand decided he had better stop thinking that he knew anything at all of what people were like beyond his own village. "He might tell the Fade we crossed on the ferry," he said at last. "Maybe he'll bring the Trollocs over after us."

Lan chuckled dryly. "Robbing a stranger is one thing, dealing with a Halfman something else again. Can you really see him ferrying Trollocs over, especially in this fog, no matter how much gold was offered? Or even talking to a Myrddraal, if he had any choice? Just the thought of it would keep him running for a month. I don't think we have to worry very much about Darkfriends in Taren Ferry. Not here. We are safe . . . for a time, at least. From this lot, anyway. Watch yourself."

Hightower had turned from peering into the fog ahead. Pointed face pushed forward and torch held high, he stared at Lan and Rand as if seeing them clearly for the first time. Deck-planks creaked under the haulers' feet and the occasional stamp of a hoof. Abruptly the ferryman twitched as he realized they were watching him watching them. With a leap he spun back to looking for the far bank, or whatever it was he sought in the fog.

"Say no more," Lan said, so softly Rand almost could not understand. "These are bad days to speak of Trollocs, or Darkfriends, or the Father of Lies, with strange ears to hear. Such talk can bring worse than the Dragon's Fang scrawled on your door."

Rand felt no desire to go on with his questions. Gloom settled on him even more than it had before. Darkfriends! As if Fades and Trollocs and Draghkar were not enough to worry about. At least you could tell a Trolloc at sight.

Abruptly pilings loomed shadowy in the mist before them. The ferry thudded against the far bank, and then the haulers were hurrying to lash the craft fast and let down the ramp at that end with a thump, while Mat and Perrin announced loudly that the Taren was not half as wide as they had heard. Lan led his stallion down the ramp, followed by Moiraine and the others. As Rand, the last, took Cloud down behind Bela, Master Hightower called out angrily.

"Here, now! Here! Where's my gold?"

"It shall be paid." Moiraine's voice came from somewhere in the mist. Rand's boots clumped from the ramp to a wooden landing. "And a silver mark for each of your men," the Aes Sedai added, "for the quick crossing."

The ferryman hesitated, face pushed forward as if he smelled danger, but at the mention of silver the haulers roused themselves. Some paused to



seize a torch, but they all thumped down the ramp before Hightower could open his mouth. With a sullen grimace, the ferryman followed his crew.

Cloud's hooves clumped hollowly in the fog as Rand made his way carefully along the landing. The gray mist was as thick here as over the river. At the foot of the landing, the Warder was handing out coins, surrounded by the torches of Hightower and his fellows. Everyone else except Moiraine waited just beyond in an anxious cluster. The Aes Sedai stood looking at the river, though what she could see was beyond Rand. With a shiver he hitched up his cloak, sodden as it was. He was really out of the Two Rivers, now, and it seemed much farther away than the width of a river.

"There," Lan said, handing a last coin to Hightower. "As agreed." He did not put up his purse, and the ferrety-faced man eyed it greedily.

With a loud creak, the landing shivered. Hightower jerked upright, head swiveling back toward the mist-cloaked ferry. The torches remaining on board were a pair of dim, fuzzy points of light. The landing groaned, and with a thunderous crack of snapping wood, the twin glows lurched, then began to revolve. Egwene cried out wordlessly, and Thom cursed.

"It's loose!" Hightower screamed. Grabbing his haulers, he pushed them toward the end of the landing. "The ferry's loose, you fools! Get it! Get it!"

The haulers stumbled a few steps under Hightower's shoves, then stopped. The faint lights on the ferry spun faster, then faster still. The fog above them swirled, sucked into a spiral. The landing trembled. The cracking and splintering of wood filled the air as the ferry began breaking apart.

"Whirlpool," one of the haulers said, his voice filled with awe.

"No whirlpools on the Taren." Hightower sounded empty. "Never been a whirlpool. . . ."

"An unfortunate occurrence." Moiraine's voice was hollow in the fog that made her a shadow as she turned from the river.

"Unfortunate," Lan agreed in a flat tone. "It seems you'll be carrying no one else across the river for a time. An ill thing that you lost your craft in our service." He delved again into his purse, ready in his hand. "This should repay you."

For a moment Hightower stared at the gold, glinting in Lan's hand in the torchlight, then his shoulders hunched and his eyes darted to the others he had carried across. Made indistinct by the fog, the Emond's Fielders stood silently. With a frightened, inarticulate cry, the ferryman snatched the coins from Lan, whirled, and ran into the mist. His haulers were only half a step behind him, their torches quickly swallowed as they vanished upriver.

"There is nothing further to hold us here," the Aes Sedai said as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Leading her white mare, she started away from the landing, up the bank.

Rand stood staring at the hidden river. *It could have been happenstance. No whirlpools, he said, but it. . .* Abruptly he realized everyone else had gone. Hurriedly he scrambled up the gently sloping bank.

In the space of three paces the heavy mist faded away to nothing. He stopped dead and stared back. Along a line running down the shore thick gray hung on one side, on the other shone a clear night sky, still dark though the sharpness of the moon hinted at dawn not far off.

The Warder and the Aes Sedai stood conferring beside their horses a short distance beyond the border of the fog. The others huddled a little apart; even in the moonlit darkness their nervousness was palpable. All eyes were on Lan and Moiraine, and all but Egwene were leaning back as if torn between losing the pair and getting too close. Rand trotted the last few spans to Egwene's side, leading Cloud, and she grinned at him. He did not think the shine in her eyes was all from moonlight.

"It follows the river as if drawn with a pen," Moiraine was saying in satisfied tones. "There are not ten women in Tar Valon who could do that unaided. Not to mention from the back of a galloping horse."

"I don't mean to complain, Moiraine Sedai," Thom said, sounding oddly diffident for him, "but would it not have been better to cover us a little further? Say to Baerlon? If that Draghkar looks on this side of the river, we'll lose everything we have gained."

"Draghkar are not very smart, Master Merrillin," the Aes Sedai said dryly. "Fearsome and deadly dangerous, and with sharp eyes, but little intelligence. It will tell the Myrddraal that this side of the river is clear, but the river itself is cloaked for miles in both directions. The Myrddraal will know the extra effort that cost me. He will have to consider that we may be escaping down the river, and that will slow him. He will have to divide his efforts. The fog should hold long enough that he will never be sure that we did not travel at least partway by boat. I could have extended the fog a little way toward Baerlon, instead, but then the Draghkar could search the river in a matter of hours, and the Myrddraal would know exactly where we were headed."

Thom made a puffing sound and shook his head. "I apologize, Aes Sedai. I hope I did not offend."

"Ah, Moi . . . ah, Aes Sedai." Mat stopped to swallow audibly. "The ferry . . . ah . . . did you . . . I mean . . . I don't understand why. . . ." He

trailed off weakly, and there was a silence so deep that the loudest sound Rand heard was his own breathing.

Finally Moiraine spoke, and her voice filled the empty silence with sharpness. "You all want explanations, but if I explained my every action to you, I would have no time for anything else." In the moonlight, the Aes Sedai seemed taller, somehow, almost looming over them. "Know this. I intend to see you safely in Tar Valon. That is the one thing you need to know."

"If we keep standing here," Lan put in, "the Draghkar will not need to search the river. If I remember correctly. . . ." He led his horse on up the riverbank.

As if the Warder's movement had loosened something in his chest, Rand drew a deep breath. He heard others doing the same, even Thom, and remembered an old saying. Better to spit in a wolf's eye than to cross an Aes Sedai. Yet the tension had lessened. Moiraine was not looming over anyone; she barely reached his chest.

"I don't suppose we could rest a bit," Perrin said hopefully, ending with a yawn. Egwene, slumped against Bela, sighed tiredly.

It was the first sound even approaching a complaint that Rand had heard from her. *Maybe now she realizes this isn't some grand adventure after all.* Then he guiltily remembered that, unlike him, she had not slept the day away. "We do need to rest, Moiraine Sedai," he said. "After all, we have ridden all night."

"Then I suggest we see what Lan has for us," Moiraine said. "Come."

She led them on up the bank, into the woods beyond the river. Bare branches thickened the shadows. A good hundred spans from the Taren they came to a dark mound beside a clearing. Here a long-ago flood had undermined and toppled an entire stand of leatherleafs, washing them together into a great, thick tangle, an apparently solid mass of trunks and branches and roots. Moiraine stopped, and suddenly a light appeared low to the ground, coming from under the heap of trees.

Thrusting a stub of a torch ahead of him, Lan crawled out from under the mound and straightened. "No unwelcome visitors," he told Moiraine. "And the wood I left is still dry, so I started a small fire. We will rest warm."

"You expected us to stop here?" Egwene said in surprise.

"It seemed a likely place," Lan replied. "I like to be prepared, just in case."

Moiraine took the torch from him. "Will you see to the horses? When you are done I will do what I can about everyone's tiredness. Right now I want to talk to Egwene. Egwene?"

Rand watched the two women crouch down and disappear under the great pile of tree trunks. There was a low opening, barely big enough to crawl into. The light of the torch vanished.

Lan had included feedbags and a small quantity of oats in the supplies, but he stopped the others from unsaddling their horses. Instead he produced the hobbles he had also packed. "They would rest easier without the saddles, but if we must leave quickly, there may be no time to replace them."

"They don't look to me like they need any rest," Perrin said as he attempted to slip a feedbag over his mount's muzzle. The horse tossed its head before allowing him to put the straps in place. Rand was having difficulties with Cloud, too, taking three tries before he could get the canvas bag over the gray's nose.

"They do," Lan told them. He straightened from hobbling his stallion. "Oh, they can still run. They will run at their fastest, if we let them, right up to the second they drop dead from exhaustion they never even felt. I would rather Moiraine Sedai had not had to do what she did, but it was necessary." He patted the stallion's neck, and the horse bobbed his head as if acknowledging the Warder's touch. "We must go slowly with them for the next few days, until they recover. More slowly than I would like. But with luck it will be enough."

"Is that . . . ?" Mat swallowed audibly. "Is that what she meant? About our tiredness?"

Rand patted Cloud's neck and stared at nothing. Despite what she had done for Tam, he had no desire for the Aes Sedai to use the Power on him. *Light, she as much as admitted sinking the ferry.*

"Something like it." Lan chuckled wryly. "But you will not have to worry about running yourself to death. Not unless things get a lot worse than they are. Just think of it as an extra night's sleep."

The shrill scream of the Draghkar suddenly echoed from above the fog-covered river. Even the horses froze. Again it came, closer now, and again, piercing Rand's skull like needles. Then the cries were fading, until they had faded away entirely.

"Luck," Lan breathed. "It searches the river for us." He gave a quick shrug and abruptly sounded matter-of-fact. "Let's get inside. I could do with some hot tea and something to fill my belly."

Rand was the first to crawl on hands and knees through the opening in the tangle of trees and down a short tunnel. At the end of it, he stopped, still crouching. Ahead was an irregularly shaped space, a woody cave easily

large enough to hold them all. The roof of tree trunks and branches came too low to allow any but the women to stand. Smoke from a small fire on a bed of river stones drifted up and through; the draft was enough to keep the space free of smoke, but the interweaving was too thick to let out even a glimmer of the flames. Moiraine and Egwene, their cloaks thrown aside, sat cross-legged, facing one another beside the fire.

"The One Power," Moiraine was saying, "comes from the True Source, the driving force of Creation, the force the Creator made to turn the Wheel of Time." She put her hands together in front of her and pushed them against each other. "*Saidin*, the male half of the True Source, and *saidar*, the female half, work against each other and at the same time together to provide that force. *Saidin*"—she lifted one hand, then let it drop—"is fouled by the touch of the Dark One, like water with a thin slick of rancid oil floating on top. The water is still pure, but it cannot be touched without touching the foulness. Only *saidar* is still safe to be used." Egwene's back was to Rand. He could not see her face, but she was leaning forward eagerly.

Mat poked Rand from behind and muttered something, and he moved on into the tree cavern. Moiraine and Egwene ignored his entry. The other men crowded in behind him, tossing off damp cloaks, settling around the fire, and holding hands out to the warmth. Lan, the last to enter, pulled waterbags and leather sacks from a nook in the wall, took out a kettle, and began to prepare tea. He paid no attention to what the women were saying, but Rand's friends began to stop toasting their hands and stare openly. Thom pretended that all of his interest was engaged in loading his thickly carved pipe, but the way he leaned toward the women gave him away. Moiraine and Egwene acted as if they were alone.

"No," Moiraine said in answer to a question Rand had missed, "the True Source cannot be used up, any more than the river can be used up by the wheel of a mill. The Source is the river; the Aes Sedai, the waterwheel."

"And you really think I can learn?" Egwene asked. Her face shone with eagerness. Rand had never seen her look so beautiful, or so far away from him. "I can become an Aes Sedai?"

Rand jumped up, cracking his head against the low roof of logs. Thom Merrill grabbed his arm, yanking him back down.

"Don't be a fool," the gleeman murmured. He eyed the women—neither seemed to have noticed—and the look he gave Rand was sympathetic. "It's beyond you now, boy."

"Child," Moiraine said gently, "only a very few can learn to touch the True Source and use the One Power. Some of those can learn to a greater

degree, some to a lesser. You are one of the bare handful for whom there is no need to learn. At least, touching the Source will come to you whether you want it or not. Without the teaching you can receive in Tar Valon, though, you will never learn to channel it fully, and you may not survive. Men who have the ability to touch *saidin* born in them die, of course, if the Red Ajah does not find them and gentle them. . . .”

Thom growled deep in his throat, and Rand shifted uncomfortably. Men like those of whom the Aes Sedai spoke were rare—he had only heard of three in his whole life, and thank the Light never in the Two Rivers—but the damage they did before the Aes Sedai found them was always bad enough for the news to carry, like the news of wars, or earthquakes that destroyed cities. He had never really understood what the Ajahs did. According to the stories they were societies among the Aes Sedai that seemed to plot and squabble among themselves more than anything else, but the stories were clear on one point. The Red Ajah held its prime duty to be the prevention of another Breaking of the World, and they did it by hunting down every man who even dreamed of wielding the One Power. Mat and Perrin looked as if they suddenly wished they were back home in their beds.

“... but some of the women die, too. It is hard to learn without a guide. The women we do not find, those who live, often become . . . well, in this part of the world they might become Wisdoms of their villages.” The Aes Sedai paused thoughtfully. “The old blood is strong in Emond’s Field, and the old blood sings. I knew you for what you were the moment I saw you. No Aes Sedai can stand in the presence of a woman who can channel, or who is close to her change, and not feel it.” She rummaged in the pouch at her belt and produced the small blue gem on a gold chain that she had earlier worn in her hair. “You are very close to your change, your first touching. It will be better if I guide you through it. That way you will avoid the . . . unpleasant effects that come to those who must find their own way.”

Egwene’s eyes widened as she looked at the stone, and she wet her lips repeatedly. “Is . . . does that have the Power?”

“Of course not,” Moiraine snapped. “*Things* do not have the Power, child. Even an *angreal* is only a tool. This is just a pretty blue stone. But it can give off light. Here.”

Egwene’s hands trembled as Moiraine laid the stone on her fingertips. She started to pull back, but the Aes Sedai held both her hands in one of hers and gently touched the other to the side of Egwene’s head.

“Look at the stone,” the Aes Sedai said softly. “It is better this way than

fumbling alone. Clear your mind of everything but the stone. Clear your mind, and let yourself drift. There is only the stone and emptiness. I will begin it. Drift, and let me guide you. No thoughts. Drift.”

Rand's fingers dug into his knees; his jaws clenched until they hurt. *She has to fail. She has to.*

Light bloomed in the stone, just one flash of blue and then gone, no brighter than a firefly, but he flinched as if it had been blinding. Egwene and Moiraine stared into the stone, faces empty. Another flash came, and another, until the azure light pulsed like the beating of a heart. *It's the Aes Sedai*, he thought desperately. *Moiraine's doing it. Not Egwene.*

One last, feeble flicker, and the stone was merely a bauble again. Rand held his breath.

For a moment Egwene continued to stare at the small stone, then she looked up at Moiraine. “I . . . I thought I felt . . . something, but. . . Perhaps you're mistaken about me. I am sorry I wasted your time.”

“I have wasted nothing, child.” A small smile of satisfaction flitted across Moiraine's lips. “That last light was yours alone.”

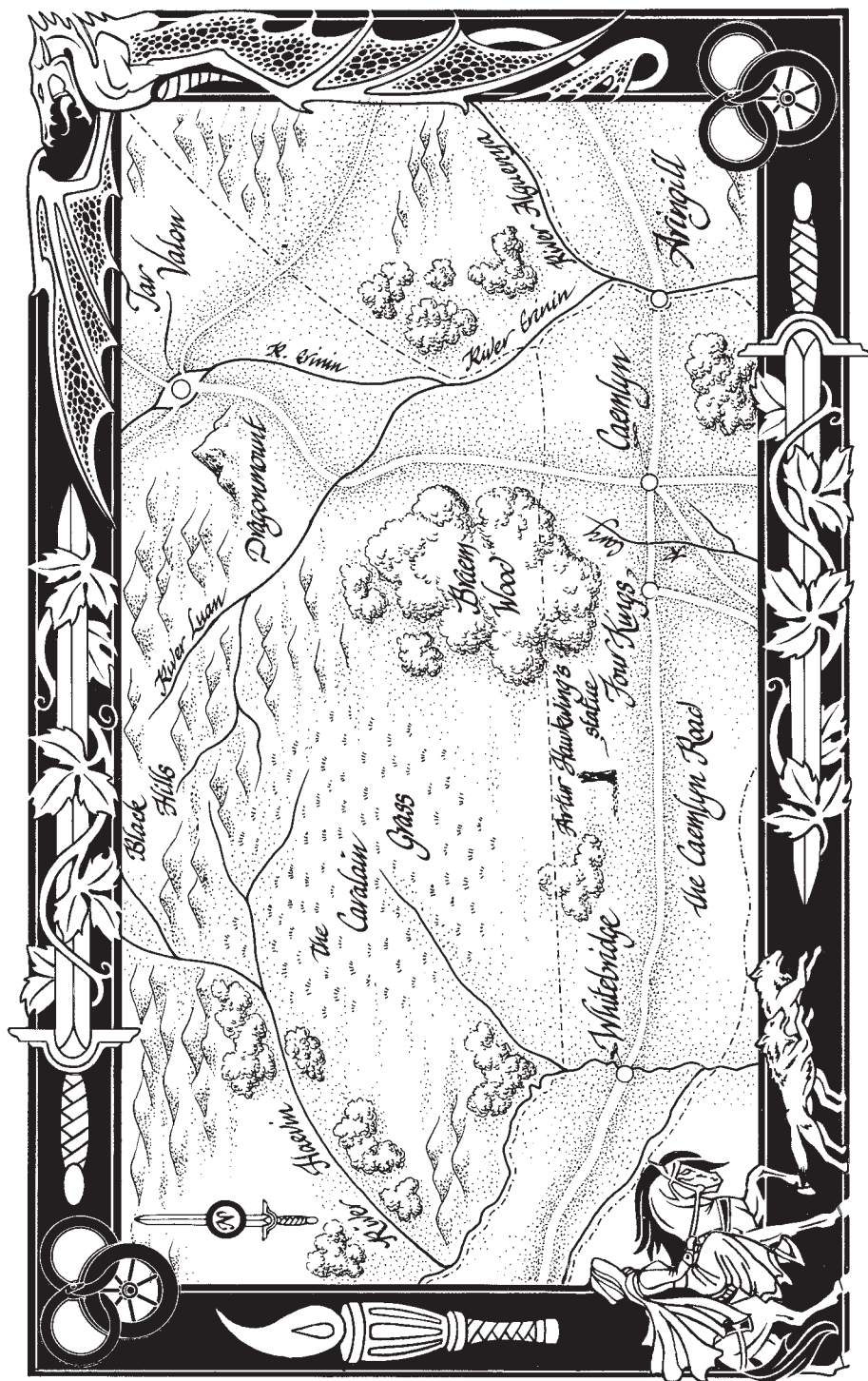
“It was?” Egwene exclaimed, then slid immediately back into glumness. “But it was barely there at all.”

“Now you are behaving like a foolish village girl. Most who come to Tar Valon must study for many months before they can do what you just did. You may go far. Perhaps even the Amyrlin Seat, one day, if you study hard and work hard.”

“You mean . . . ?” With a cry of delight Egwene threw her arms around the Aes Sedai. “Oh, thank you. Rand, did you hear? I'm going to be an Aes Sedai!”









# CHAPTER

## 13

---



### *Choices*

Before they went to sleep Moiraine knelt by each in turn and laid her hands on their heads. Lan grumbled that he had no need and she should not waste her strength, but he did not try to stop her. Egwene was eager for the experience, Mat and Perrin clearly frightened of it, and frightened to say no. Thom jerked away from the Aes Sedai's hands, but she seized his gray head with a look that allowed no nonsense. The gleeman scowled through the entire thing. She smiled mockingly once she took her hands away. His frown deepened, but he did look refreshed. They all did.

Rand had drawn back into a niche in the uneven wall where he hoped he would be overlooked. His eyes wanted to slide closed once he leaned back against the timber jumble, but he forced himself to watch. He pushed a fist against his mouth to stifle a yawn. A little sleep, an hour or two, and he would be just fine. Moiraine did not forget him, though.

He flinched at the coolness of her fingers on his face, and said, "I don't—" His eyes widened in wonder. Tiredness drained out of him like water running downhill; aches and soreness ebbed to dim memories and vanished. He stared at her with his mouth hanging open. She only smiled and withdrew her hands.

"It is done," she said, and as she stood with a weary sigh he was reminded that she could not do the same for herself. Indeed, she only drank

a little tea, refusing the bread and cheese Lan tried to press on her, before curling up beside the fire. She seemed to fall asleep the instant she wrapped her cloak around her.

The others, all save Lan, were dropping asleep wherever they could find a space to stretch out, but Rand could not imagine why. He felt as if he had already had a full night in a good bed. No sooner did he lean back against the log wall, though, than sleep rolled him under. When Lan poked him awake an hour later he felt as though he had had three days rest.

The Warder awakened them all, except Moiraine, and he sternly hushed any sound that might disturb her. Even so, he allowed them only a short stay in the snug cave of trees. Before the sun was twice its own height above the horizon, all traces that anyone had ever stopped there had been cleared away and they were all mounted and moving north toward Baerlon, riding slowly to conserve the horses. The Aes Sedai's eyes were shadowed, but she sat her saddle upright and steady.

Fog still hung thick over the river behind them, a gray wall resisting the efforts of the feeble sun to burn it away and hiding the Two Rivers from view. Rand watched over his shoulder as he rode, hoping for one last glimpse, even of Taren Ferry, until the fogbank was lost to sight.

"I never thought I'd ever be this far from home," he said when the trees at last hid both the fog and the river. "Remember when Watch Hill seemed a long way?" *Two days ago, that was. It seems like forever.*

"In a month or two, we'll be back," Perrin said in a strained voice. "Think what we'll have to tell."

"Even Trollocs can't chase us forever," Mat said. "Burn me, they can't." He straightened around with a heavy sigh, slumping in his saddle as if he did not believe a word that had been said.

"Men!" Egwene snorted. "You get the adventure you're always prating about, and already you're talking about home." She held her head high, yet Rand noticed a tremor to her voice, now that nothing more was to be seen of the Two Rivers.

Neither Moiraine nor Lan made any attempt to reassure them, not a word to say that of course they would come back. He tried not to think on what that might mean. Even rested, he was full enough of doubts without searching out more. Hunching in his saddle he began a waking dream of tending the sheep alongside Tam in a pasture with deep, lush grass and larks singing of a spring morning. And a trip into Emond's Field, and Bel Tine the way it had been, dancing on the Green with never a care beyond whether he might stumble in the steps. He managed to lose himself in it for a long time.

The journey to Baerlon took almost a week. Lan muttered about the laggardness of their travel, but it was he who set the pace and forced the rest to keep it. With himself and his stallion, Mandarb—he said it meant “Blade” in the Old Tongue—he was not so sparing. The Warder covered twice as much ground as they did, galloping ahead, his color-shifting cloak swirling in the wind, to scout what lay before them, or dropping behind to examine their backtrail. Any others who tried to move at more than a walk, though, got cutting words on taking care of their animals, biting words on how well they would do afoot if the Trollocs did appear. Not even Moiraine was proof against his tongue if she let the white mare pick up her step. Aldieb, the mare was called; in the Old Tongue, “Westwind,” the wind that brought the spring rains.

The Warder’s scouting never turned up any sign of pursuit, or ambush. He spoke only to Moiraine of what he saw, and that quietly, so it could not be overheard, and the Aes Sedai informed the rest of them of what she thought they needed to know. In the beginning, Rand looked over his shoulder as much as he did ahead. He was not the only one. Perrin fingered his axe often, and Mat rode with an arrow nocked to his bow, in the beginning. But the land behind remained empty of Trollocs or figures in black cloaks, the sky remained empty of Draghkar. Slowly, Rand began to think perhaps they really had escaped.

No very great cover was to be had, even in the thickest parts of the woods. Winter clung as hard north of the Taren as it did in the Two Rivers. Stands of pine or fir or leatherleaf, and here and there a few spicewoods or laurels, dotted a forest of otherwise bare, gray branches. Not even the elders showed a leaf. Only scattered green sprigs of new growth stood out against brown meadows beaten flat by the winter’s snows. Here, too, much of what did grow was stinging nettles and coarse thistle and stinkweed. On the bare dirt of the forest floor some of the last snow still hung on, in shady patches and in drifts beneath the low branches of evergreens. Everyone kept their cloaks drawn well about them, for the thin sunlight had no warmth to it and the night cold pierced deep. No more birds flew here than in the Two Rivers, not even ravens.

There was nothing leisurely about the slowness of their movement. The North Road—Rand continued to think of it that way, though he suspected it might have a different name here, north of the Taren—still ran almost due north, but at Lan’s insistence their path snaked this way and that through the forest as often as it ran along the hard-packed dirt road. A village, or a farm, or any sign of men or civilization sent them circling

for miles to avoid it, though there were few enough of any of those. The whole first day Rand saw no evidence aside from the road that men had ever been in that woods. It came to him that even when he had gone to the foot of the Mountains of Mist he might not have been as far from a human habitation as he was that day.

The first farm he saw—a large frame house and tall barn with high-peaked, thatched roofs, a curl of smoke rising from a stone chimney—was a shock.

“It’s no different from back home,” Perrin said, frowning at the distant buildings, barely visible through the trees. People moved around the farmyard, as yet unaware of the travelers.

“Of course it is,” Mat said. “We’re just not close enough to see.”

“I tell you, it’s no different,” Perrin insisted.

“It must be. We’re north of the Taren, after all.”

“Quiet, you two,” Lan growled. “We don’t want to be seen, remember? This way.” He turned west, to circle the farm through the trees.

Looking back, Rand thought Perrin was right. The farm looked much the same as any around Emond’s Field. There was a small boy toting water from the well, and older boys tending sheep behind a rail fence. It even had a curing shed, for tabac. But Mat was right, too. *We’re north of the Taren. It must be different.*

Always they halted while light still clung to the sky, to choose a spot sloped for drainage and sheltered from the wind that seldom died completely, only changed direction. Their fire was always small and hidden from only a few yards off, and once tea was brewed, the flames were doused and the coals buried.

At their first stop, before the sun sank, Lan began teaching the boys what to do with the weapons they carried. He started with the bow. After watching Mat put three arrows into a knot the size of a man’s head, on the fissured trunk of a dead leatherleaf, at a hundred paces, he told the others to take their turns. Perrin duplicated Mat’s feat, and Rand, summoning the flame and the void, the empty calm that let the bow become a part of him, or him of it, clustered his three where the points almost touched one another. Mat gave him a congratulatory clap on the shoulder.

“Now if you all had bows,” the Warder said dryly when they started grinning, “and if the Trollocs agreed not to come so close you couldn’t use them. . . .” The grins faded abruptly. “Let me see what I can teach you in case they do come that close.”

He showed Perrin a bit of how to use that great-bladed axe; raising an

axe to someone, or something, that had a weapon was not at all like chopping wood or flailing around in pretend. Setting the big apprentice blacksmith to a series of exercises, block, parry, and strike, he did the same for Rand and his sword. Not the wild leaping about and slashing that Rand had in mind whenever he thought about using it, but smooth motions, one flowing into another, almost a dance.

"Moving the blade is not enough," Lan said, "though some think it is. The mind is part of it, most of it. Blank your mind, shepherd. Empty it of hate or fear, of everything. Burn them away. You others listen to this, too. You can use it with the axe or the bow, with a spear, or a quarterstaff, or even your bare hands."

Rand stared at him. "The flame and the void," he said wonderingly. "That's what you mean, isn't it? My father taught me about that."

The Warder gave him an unreadable look in return. "Hold the sword as I showed you, shepherd. I cannot make a mud-footed villager into a blademaker in an hour, but perhaps I can keep you from slicing off your own foot."

Rand sighed and held the sword upright before him in both hands. Moiraine watched without expression, but the next evening she told Lan to continue the lessons.

The meal at evening was always the same as at midday and breakfast, flatbread and cheese and dried meat, except that evenings they had hot tea to wash it down instead of water. Thom entertained them, evenings. Lan would not let the gleeman play harp or flute—no need to rouse the countryside, the Warder said—but Thom juggled and told stories. "Mara and the Three Foolish Kings," or one of the hundreds about Anla the Wise Counselor, or something filled with glory and adventure, like *The Great Hunt of the Horn*, but always with a happy ending and a joyous homecoming.

Yet if the land was peaceful around them, if no Trollocs appeared among the trees, no Draghkar among the clouds, it seemed to Rand that they managed to raise their tension themselves, whenever it was in danger of vanishing.

There was the morning that Egwene awoke and began unbraiding her hair. Rand watched her from the corner of his eye as he made up his blanketroll. Every night when the fire was doused, everyone took to their blankets except for Egwene and the Aes Sedai. The two women always went aside from the others and talked for an hour or two, returning when the others were asleep. Egwene combed her hair out—one hundred strokes; he counted—while he was saddling Cloud, tying his saddlebags and blanket

behind the saddle. Then she tucked the comb away, swept her loose hair over her shoulder, and pulled up the hood of her cloak.

Startled, he asked, "What are you doing?" She gave him a sidelong look without answering. It was the first time he had spoken to her in two days, he realized, since the night in the log shelter on the bank of the Taren, but he did not let that stop him. "All your life you've waited to wear your hair in a braid, and now you're giving it up? Why? Because she doesn't braid hers?"

"Aes Sedai don't braid their hair," she said simply. "At least, not unless they want to."

"You aren't an Aes Sedai. You're Egwene al'Vere from Emond's Field, and the Women's Circle would have a fit if they could see you now."

"Women's Circle business is none of yours, Rand al'Thor. And I *will* be an Aes Sedai. Just as soon as I reach Tar Valon."

He snorted. "As soon as you reach Tar Valon. Why? Light, tell me that. You're no Darkfriend."

"Do you think Moiraine Sedai is a Darkfriend? Do you?" She squared around to face him with her fists clenched, and he almost thought she was going to hit him. "After she saved the village? After she saved your father?"

"I don't know what she is, but whatever she is, it doesn't say anything about the rest of them. The stories—"

"Grow up, Rand! Forget the stories and use your eyes."

"My eyes saw her sink the ferry! Deny that! Once you get an idea in your head, you won't budge even if somebody points out you're trying to stand on water. If you weren't such a Light-blinded fool, you'd see—!"

"Fool, am I? Let me tell you a thing or two, Rand al'Thor! You are the muliest, most wool-headed—!"

"You two trying to wake everybody inside ten miles?" the Warder asked.

Standing there with his mouth open, trying to get a word in edgewise, Rand suddenly realized he had been shouting. They both had.

Egwene's face went scarlet to her eyebrows, and she spun away with a muttered, "Men!" that seemed as much for the Warder as for him.

Warily, Rand looked around the camp. Everybody was looking at him, not just the Warder. Mat and Perrin, with their faces white. Thom, tensed as if ready to run or fight. Moiraine. The Aes Sedai's face was expressionless, but her eyes seemed to bore into his head. Desperately, he tried to recall exactly what he had said, about Aes Sedai and Darkfriends.

"It is time to be going," Moiraine said. She turned to Aldieb, and Rand shivered as if he had been let out of a trap. He wondered if he had been.

Two nights later, with the fire burning low, Mat licked the last crumbs of cheese from his fingers and said, "You know, I think we've lost them for good." Lan was off in the night, taking a last look around. Moiraine and Egwene had gone aside for one of their conversations. Thom was half dozing over his pipe, and the young men had the fire to themselves.

Perrin, idly poking the embers with a stick, answered. "If we've lost them, why does Lan keep scouting?" Nearly asleep, Rand rolled over, his back to the fire.

"We lost them back at Taren Ferry." Mat lay back with his fingers laced behind his head, staring at the moon-filled sky. "If they were even really after us."

"You think that Draghkar was chasing us because it liked us?" Perrin asked.

"I say, stop worrying about Trollocs and such," Mat went on as if Perrin had not spoken, "and start thinking about seeing the world. We're out where the stories come from. What do you think a real city is like?"

"We're going to Baerlon," Rand said sleepily, but Mat snorted.

"Baerlon's all very well, but I've seen that old map Master al'Vere has. If we turn south once we reach Caemlyn, the road leads all the way to Illian, and beyond."

"What's so special about Illian?" Perrin said, yawning.

"For one thing," Mat replied, "Illian isn't full of Aes Se—"

A silence fell, and Rand was suddenly wide awake. Moiraine had come back early. Egwene was with her, but it was the Aes Sedai, standing at the edge of the firelight, who held their attention. Mat lay there on his back, his mouth still open, staring at her. Moiraine's eyes caught the light like dark, polished stones. Abruptly Rand wondered how long she had been standing there.

"The lads were just—" Thom began, but Moiraine spoke right over the top of him.

"A few days respite, and you are ready to give up." Her calm, level voice contrasted sharply with her eyes. "A day or two of quiet, and already you have forgotten Winternight."

"We haven't forgotten," Perrin said. "It's just—" Still not raising her voice, the Aes Sedai treated him as she had the gleeman.

"Is that the way you all feel? You are all eager to run off to Illian and forget about Trollocs, and Halfmen, and Draghkar?" She ran her eyes over them—that stony glint playing against the everyday tone of voice made Rand uneasy—but she gave no one a chance to speak. "The Dark One is

after you three, one or all, and if I let you go running off wherever you want to go, he will take you. Whatever the Dark One wants, I oppose, so hear this and know it true. Before I let the Dark One have you, I will destroy you myself."

It was her voice, so matter-of-fact, that convinced Rand. The Aes Sedai would do exactly what she said, if she thought it was necessary. He had a hard time sleeping that night, and he was not the only one. Even the glee-man did not begin snoring till long after the last coals died. For once, Moiraine offered no help.

Those nightly talks between Egwene and the Aes Sedai were a sore point for Rand. Whenever they disappeared into the darkness, aside from the rest for privacy, he wondered what they were saying, what they were doing. What was the Aes Sedai doing to Egwene?

One night, he waited until the other men had all settled down, Thom snoring like a saw cutting an oak knot. Then he slipped away, clutching his blanket around him. Using every bit of skill he had gained stalking rabbits, he moved with the moon shadows until he was crouched at the base of a tall leatherleaf tree, thick with tough, broad leaves, close enough to hear Moiraine and Egwene, where they sat on a fallen log with a small lantern for light.

"Ask," Moiraine was saying, "and if I can tell you now, I will. Understand, there is much for which you are not yet ready, things you cannot learn until you have learned other things which require still others to be learned before them. But ask what you will."

"The Five Powers," Egwene said slowly. "Earth, Wind, Fire, Water, and Spirit. It doesn't seem fair that men should have been strongest in wielding Earth and Fire. Why should they have had the strongest Powers?"

Moiraine laughed. "Is that what you think, child? Is there a rock so hard that wind and water cannot wear it away, a fire so strong that water cannot quench it or wind snuff it out?"

Egwene was silent for a time, digging her toe into the forest floor. "They . . . they were the ones who . . . who tried to free the Dark One and the Forsaken, weren't they? The male Aes Sedai?" She took a deep breath and picked up speed. "The women were not part of it. It was the men who went mad and broke the world."

"You are afraid," Moiraine said grimly. "If you had remained in Emond's Field, you would have become Wisdom, in time. That was Nynaeve's plan, was it not? Or, you would have sat in the Women's Circle and managed the affairs of Emond's Field while the Village Council thought it was doing so.



But you did the unthinkable. You left Emond's Field, left the Two Rivers, seeking adventure. You wanted to do it, and at the same time you are afraid of it. And you are stubbornly refusing to let your fear best you. You would not have asked me how a woman becomes an Aes Sedai, otherwise. You would not have thrown custom and convention over the fence, otherwise."

"No," Egwene protested. "I'm not afraid. I do want to become an Aes Sedai."

"Better for you if you were afraid, but I hope you hold to that conviction. Few women these days have the ability to become initiates, much less have the wish to." Moiraine's voice sounded as if she had begun musing to herself. "Surely never before two in one village. The old blood is indeed still strong in the Two Rivers."

In the shadows, Rand shifted. A twig snapped under his foot. He froze instantly, sweating and holding his breath, but neither of the women looked around.

"Two?" Egwene exclaimed. "Who else? Is it Kari? Kari Thane? Lara Ayellan?"

Moiraine gave an exasperated click of her tongue, then said sternly, "You must forget I said that. Her road lies another way, I fear. Concern yourself with your own circumstances. It is not an easy road you have chosen."

"I will not turn back," Egwene said.

"Be that as it may. But you still want reassurance, and I cannot give it to you, not in the way you want."

"I don't understand."

"You want to know that Aes Sedai are good and pure, that it was those wicked men of the legends who caused the Breaking of the World, not the women. Well, it was the men, but they were no more wicked than any men. They were insane, not evil. The Aes Sedai you will find in Tar Valon are human, no different from any other women except for the ability that sets us apart. They are brave and cowardly, strong and weak, kind and cruel, warm-hearted and cold. Becoming an Aes Sedai will not change you from what you are."

Egwene drew a heavy breath. "I suppose I was afraid of that, that I'd be changed by the Power. That and the Trollocs. And the Fade. And. . . . Moiraine Sedai, in the name of the Light, why did the Trollocs come to Emond's Field?"

The Aes Sedai's head swung, and she looked straight at Rand's hiding place. His breath seized in his throat; her eyes were as hard as when she

had threatened them, and he had the feeling they could penetrate the leatherleaf's thick branches. *Light, what will she do if she finds me listening?*

He tried to melt back into the deeper shadows. With his eyes on the women, a root snagged his foot, and he barely caught himself from tumbling into dead brush that would have pointed him out with a crackle of snapping branches like fireworks. Panting, he scrambled away on all fours, keeping silent as much by luck as by anything he did. His heart pounded so hard he thought that might give him away itself. *Fool! Eavesdropping on an Aes Sedai!*

Back where the others were sleeping, he managed to slip in among them silently. Lan moved as he dropped to the ground and jerked his blanket up, but the Warder settled back with a sigh. He had only been rolling over in his sleep. Rand let out a long, silent breath.

A moment later Moiraine appeared out of the night, stopping where she could study the slumbering shapes. Moonlight made a nimbus around her. Rand closed his eyes and breathed evenly, all the while listening hard for footsteps coming closer. None did. When he opened his eyes again, she was gone.

When finally sleep came, it was fitful and filled with sweaty dreams where all the men in Emond's Field claimed to be the Dragon Reborn and all the women had blue stones in their hair like the one Moiraine wore. He did not try to overhear Moiraine and Egwene again.

On into the sixth day the slow journey stretched. The warmthless sun slid slowly toward the treetops, while a handful of thin clouds drifted high to the north. The wind gusted higher for a moment, and Rand pulled his cloak back up onto his shoulders, muttering to himself. He wondered if they would ever get to Baerlon. The distance they had traveled from the river already was more than enough to take him from Taren Ferry to the White River, but Lan always said it was just a short journey whenever he was asked, hardly worth calling a journey at all. It made him feel lost.

Lan appeared ahead of them in the woods, returning from one of his forays. He reined in and rode beside Moiraine, his head bent close to hers.

Rand grimaced, but he did not ask any questions. Lan simply refused to acknowledge all such questions aimed at him.

Only Egwene, among the others, even appeared to notice Lan's return, so used to this arrangement had they become, and she kept back, too. The Aes Sedai might have begun acting as if Egwene were in charge of the Emond's Fielders, but that gave her no say when the Warder made his reports. Perrin was carrying Mat's bow, wrapped in the thoughtful silence

that seemed to take them all more and more as they got further from the Two Rivers. The horses' slow walk allowed Mat to practice juggling three small stones under Thom Merrill's watchful eye. The gleeman had given lessons each night, too, as well as Lan.

Lan finished whatever he had been telling Moiraine, and she twisted in her saddle to look back at the others. Rand tried not to stiffen when her eyes moved across him. Did they linger on him a moment longer than on anyone else? He had the queasy feeling that she knew who had been listening in the darkness that night.

"Hey, Rand," Mat called, "I can juggle four!" Rand waved in reply without looking around. "I told you I'd get to four before you. I—Look!"

They had topped a low hill, and below them, a scant mile away through the stark trees and the stretching shadows of evening, lay Baerlon. Rand gasped, trying to smile and gape at the same time.

A log wall, nearly twenty feet tall, surrounded the town, with wooden watchtowers scattered along its length. Within, rooftops of slate and tile glinted with the sinking sun, and feathers of smoke drifted upward from chimneys. Hundreds of chimneys. There was not a thatched roof to be seen. A broad road ran east from the town, and another west, each with at least a dozen wagons and twice as many ox-carts trudging toward the palisade. Farms lay scattered about the town, thickest to the north while only a few broke the forest to the south, but they might as well not have existed so far as Rand was concerned. *It's bigger than Emond's Field and Watch Hill and Deven Ride all put together! And maybe Taren Ferry, too.*

"So that's a city," Mat breathed, leaning forward across his horse's neck to stare.

Perrin could only shake his head. "How can so many people live in one place?"

Egwene simply stared.

Thom Merrill glanced at Mat, then rolled his eyes and blew out his mustaches. "City!" he snorted.

"And you, Rand?" Moiraine said. "What do you think of your first sight of Baerlon?"

"I think it's a long way from home," he said slowly, bringing a sharp laugh from Mat.

"You have further to go yet," Moiraine said. "Much further. But there is no other choice, except to run and hide and run again for the rest of your lives. And short lives they would be. You must remember that, when the journey becomes hard. You have no choice."

Rand exchanged glances with Mat and Perrin. By their faces, they were thinking the same thing he was. How could she talk as if they had any choice after what she had said? *The Aes Sedai's made our choices.*

Moiraine went on as if their thoughts were not plain. "The danger begins again here. Watch what you say within those walls. Above all, do not mention Trollocs, or Halfmen, or any such. You must not even think of the Dark One. Some in Baerlon have even less love for Aes Sedai than do the people of Emond's Field, and there may even be Darkfriends." Egwene gasped, and Perrin muttered under his breath. Mat's face paled, but Moiraine went on calmly. "We must attract as little attention as possible." Lan was exchanging his cloak of shifting grays and greens for one of dark brown, more ordinary, though of fine cut and weave. His color-changing cloak made a large bulge in one of his saddlebags. "We do not go by our own names here," Moiraine continued. "Here I am known as Alys, and Lan is Andra. Remember that. Good. Let us be within the walls before night catches us. The gates of Baerlon are closed from sundown to sunrise."

Lan led the way down the hill and through the woods toward the log wall. The road passed half a dozen farms—none lay close, and none of the people finishing their chores seemed to notice the travelers—ending at heavy wooden gates bound with wide straps of black iron. They were closed tight, even if the sun was not down yet.

Lan rode close to the wall and gave a tug to a frayed rope hanging down beside the gates. A bell clanged on the other side of the wall. Abruptly a wizened face under a battered cloth cap peered down suspiciously from atop the wall, glaring between the cut-off ends of two of the logs, a good three spans over their heads.

"What's all this, eh? It's too late in the day to be opening this gate. Too late, I say. Go around to the Whitebridge Gate if you want to—" Moiraine's mare moved out to where the man atop the wall had a clear view of her. Suddenly his wrinkles deepened in a gap-toothed smile, and he seemed to quiver between speaking and doing his duty. "I didn't know it was you, mistress. Wait. I'll be right down. Just wait. I'm coming. I'm coming."

The head dipped out of sight, but Rand could still hear muffled shouts for them to stay where they were, that he was coming. With great creaks of disuse, the right-hand gate slowly swung outward. It stopped when open just wide enough for one horse to pass through at a time, and the gatekeeper poked his head into the gap, flashed his half-toothless smile at them again and darted back out of the way. Moiraine followed Lan through, with Egwene right behind her.

Rand trotted Cloud after Bela and found himself in a narrow street fronted by high wooden fences and warehouses, tall and windowless, broad doors closed up tight. Moiraine and Lan were already on foot, speaking to the wrinkle-faced gatekeeper, so Rand dismounted, too.

The little man, in a much-mended cloak and coat, held his cloth cap crumpled in one hand and ducked his head whenever he spoke. He peered at those dismounting behind Lan and Moiraine, and shook his head. "Down-country folk." He grinned. "Why, Mistress Alys, you taken up collecting downcountry folk with hay in their hair?" His look took in Thom Merrilin, then. "You ain't a sheepfarmer. I remember letting you go through some days back, I do. Didn't like your tricks downcountry, eh, gleeman?"

"I hope you remembered to forget letting us through, Master Avin," Lan said, pressing a coin into the man's free hand. "And letting us back in, too."

"No need for that, Master Andra. No need for that. You give me plenty when you went out. Plenty." Just the same, Avin made the coin disappear as deftly as if he were a gleeman, too. "I ain't told nobody, and I won't, neither. Especially not them Whitecloaks," he finished with a scowl. He pursed up his lips to spit, then glanced at Moiraine and swallowed, instead.

Rand blinked, but kept his mouth shut. The others did, too, though it appeared to be an effort for Mat. *Children of the Light*, Rand thought wonderingly. Stories told about the Children by peddlers and merchants and merchants' guards varied from admiration to hatred, but all agreed the Children hated Aes Sedai as much as they did Darkfriends. He wondered if this was more trouble already.

"The Children are in Baerlon?" Lan demanded.

"They surely are." The gatekeeper bobbed his head. "Came the same day you left, as I recall. Ain't nobody here likes them at all. Most don't let on, of course."

"Have they said why they are here?" Moiraine asked intently.

"Why they're here, mistress?" Avin was so astonished he forgot to duck his head. "Of course, they said why—Oh, I forgot. You been downcountry. Likely you ain't heard nothing but sheep bleating. They say they're here because of what's going on down in Ghealdan. The Dragon, you know—well, him as calls himself Dragon. They say the fellow's stirring up evil—which I expect he is—and they're here to stamp it out, only he's down there in Ghealdan, not here. Just an excuse to meddle in other people's business, is what I figure. There's already been the Dragon's Fang on some people's doors." This time he did spit.

"Have they caused much trouble, then?" Lan said, and Avin shook his head vigorously.

"Not that they don't want to, I expect, only the Governor don't trust them no more than I do. He won't let but maybe ten or so inside the walls at one time, and ain't they mad about that. The rest have a camp a little ways north, I hear. Bet they got the farmers looking over their shoulders. The ones that do come in, they just stalk around in those white cloaks, looking down their noses at honest folk. Walk in the Light, they say, and it's an order. Near come to blows more than once with the wagoneers and miners and smelters and all, and even the Watch, but the Governor wants it all peaceful, and that's how it's been so far. If they're hunting evil, I say why aren't they up in Saldaea? There's some kind of trouble up there, I hear. Or down in Ghealdan? There's been a big battle down there, they say. Real big."

Moiraine drew a soft breath. "I had heard that Aes Sedai were going to Ghealdan."

"Yes, they did, mistress." Avin's head started bobbing again. "They went to Ghealdan, all right, and that's what started this battle, or so I hear. They say some of those Aes Sedai are dead. Maybe all of them. I know some folks don't hold with Aes Sedai, but I say, who else is going to stop a false Dragon? Eh? And those damned fools who think they can be men Aes Sedai or some such. What about them? Course, some say—not the Whitecloaks, mind, and not me, but some folks—that maybe this fellow really is the Dragon Reborn. He can do things, I hear. Use the One Power. There's thousands following him."

"Don't be a fool," Lan snapped, and Avin's face folded into a hurt look.

"I'm only saying what I heard, ain't I? Just what I heard, Master Andra. They say, some do, that he's moving his army east and south, toward Tear." His voice became heavy with meaning. "They say he's named them the People of the Dragon."

"Names mean little," Moiraine said calmly. If anything she had heard disturbed her, she gave no outward sign of it now. "You could call your mule People of the Dragon, if you wanted."

"Not likely, mistress." Avin chuckled. "Not with the Whitecloaks around, for sure. I don't expect anybody else would look kindly on a name like that, neither. I see what you mean, but . . . oh, no, mistress. Not *my* mule."

"No doubt a wise decision," Moiraine said. "Now we must be off."

"And don't you worry, mistress," Avin said, with a deep bob of his

head, "I ain't seen nobody." He darted to the gate and began tugging it closed with quick jerks. "Ain't seen nobody, and ain't seen nothing." The gate thudded shut, and he pulled down the locking bar with a rope. "In fact, mistress, this gate ain't been open in days."

"The Light illumine you, Avin," Moiraine said.

She led them away from the gate, then. Rand looked back, once, and Avin was still standing in front of the gate. He seemed to be polishing a coin with an edge of his cloak and chuckling.

The way led through dirt streets barely the width of two wagons, empty of people, all lined with warehouses and occasional high, wooden fences. Rand walked a time beside the gleeman. "Thom, what was all that about Tear, and the People of the Dragon? Tear is a city all the way down on the Sea of Storms, isn't it?"

"*The Karaethon Cycle*," Thom said curtly.

Rand blinked. *The Prophecies of the Dragon*. "Nobody tells the . . . those stories in the Two Rivers. Not in Emond's Field, anyway. The Wisdom would skin them alive, if they did."

"I suppose she would, at that," Thom said dryly. He glanced at Moiraine up ahead with Lan, saw she could not overhear, and went on. "Tear is the greatest port on the Sea of Storms, and the Stone of Tear is the fortress that guards it. The Stone is said to be the first fortress built after the Breaking of the World, and in all this time it has never fallen, though more than one army has tried. One of the Prophecies says that the Stone of Tear will never fall until the People of the Dragon come to the Stone. Another says the Stone will never fall till the Sword That Cannot Be Touched is wielded by the Dragon's hand." Thom grimaced. "The fall of the Stone will be one of the major proofs that the Dragon has been reborn. May the Stone stand till I am dust."

"The sword that cannot be touched?"

"That's what it says. I don't know whether it is a sword. Whatever it is, it lies in the Heart of the Stone, the central citadel of the fortress. None but the High Lords of Tear can enter there, and they never speak of what lies inside. Certainly not to gleemen, anyway."

Rand frowned. "The Stone cannot fall until the Dragon wields the sword, but how can he, unless the Stone has already fallen? Is the Dragon supposed to be a High Lord of Tear?"

"Not much chance of that," the gleeman said dryly. "Tear hates anything to do with the Power even more than Amador, and Amador is the stronghold of the Children of the Light."



"Then how can the Prophecy be fulfilled?" Rand asked. "I'd like it well enough if the Dragon was never reborn, but a prophecy that cannot be fulfilled doesn't make much sense. It sounds like a story meant to make people think the Dragon never will be reborn. Is that it?"

"You ask an awful lot of questions, boy," Thom said. "A prophecy that was easily fulfilled would not be worth much, now would it?" Suddenly his voice brightened. "Well, we're here. Wherever here is."

Lan had stopped by a section of head-high wooden fence that looked no different from any other they had passed. He was working the blade of his dagger between two of the boards. Abruptly he gave a grunt of satisfaction, pulled, and a length of the fence swung out like a gate. In fact it was a gate, Rand saw, though one meant to be opened only from the other side. The metal latch that Lan had lifted with his dagger showed that.

Moiraine went through immediately, drawing Aldieb behind her. Lan motioned the others to follow, and brought up the rear, closing the gate behind him.

On the other side of the fence Rand found himself in the stableyard of an inn. A loud bustle and clatter came from the building's kitchen, but what struck him was its size: it covered more than twice as much ground as the Winespring Inn, and was four stories high besides. Well over half the windows were aglow in the deepening twilight. He wondered at this city, that could have so many strangers in it.

No sooner had they come well into the stableyard than three men in dirty canvas aprons appeared at the huge stable's broad, arched doors. One, a wiry fellow and the only one without a manure fork in his hands, came forward waving his arms.

"Here! Here! You can't come in that way! You'll have to go round the front!"

Lan's hand went to his purse again, but even as it did another man, as big around as Master al'Vere, came hurrying out of the inn. Puffs of hair stuck out above his ears, and his sparkling white apron was as good as a sign proclaiming him the innkeeper.

"It's all right, Mutch," the newcomer said. "It's all right. These folk are expected guests. Take care of their horses, now. Good care."

Mutch sullenly knuckled his forehead, then motioned his two companions to come help. Rand and the others hurriedly got their saddlebags and blanketrolls down while the innkeeper turned to Moiraine. He gave her a deep bow, and spoke with a genuine smile.

"Welcome, Mistress Alys. Welcome. It's good to be seeing you, you and



Master Andra, both. Very good. Your fine conversation has been missed. Yes, it has. I must say I worried, you going downcountry and all. Well, I mean, at a time like this, with the weather all crazy and wolves howling right up to the walls in the night.” Abruptly he slapped both hands against his round belly and shook his head. “Here I go on like this, chattering away, instead of taking you inside. Come. Come. Hot meals and warm beds, that’s what you’ll be wanting. And the best in Baerlon are right here. The very best.”

“And hot baths, too, I trust, Master Fitch?” Moiraine said, and Egwene echoed her fervently. “Oh, yes.”

“Baths?” the innkeeper said. “Why, just the best and the hottest in Baerlon. Come. Welcome to the Stag and Lion. Welcome to Baerlon.”



# CHAPTER

## 14

---



### *The Stag and Lion*

Inside, the inn was every bit as busy as the sounds coming from it had indicated and more. The party from Emond's Field followed Master Fitch through the back door, soon weaving around and between a constant stream of men and women in long aprons, platters of food and trays of drink held high. The bearers murmured quick apologies when they got in anyone's way, but they never slowed by a step. One of the men took hurried orders from Master Fitch and disappeared at a run.

"The inn is near full, I'm afraid," the innkeeper told Moiraine. "Almost to the rafters. Every inn in the town is the same. With the winter we just had . . . well, as soon as it cleared enough for them to get down out of the mountains we were inundated—yes, that's the word—inundated by men from the mines and smelters, all telling the most horrible tales. Wolves, and worse. The kind of tales men tell when they've been cooped up all winter. I can't think there's anyone left up there at all, we have that many here. But never fear. Things may be a little crowded, but I'll do my best by you and Master Andra. And your friends, too, of course." He glanced curiously once or twice at Rand and the others; except for Thom their clothes named them country folk, and Thom's gleeman's cloak made him a strange traveling companion as well for "Mistress Alys" and "Master Andra." "I will do my best, you may rest assured."

Rand stared at the bustle around them and tried to avoid being stepped on, though none of the help really seemed to be in any danger of that. He kept thinking of how Master al’Vere and his wife tended the Winespring Inn with sometimes a little assistance from their daughters.

Mat and Perrin craned their necks in interest toward the common room, from which rolled a wave of laughter and singing and jovial shouting whenever the wide door at the end of the hall swung open. Muttering about finding out the news, the Warder grimly disappeared through that swinging door, swallowed by a wave of merriment.

Rand wanted to follow him, but he wanted a bath even more. He could have done with people and laughing right then, but the common room would appreciate his presence more when he was clean. Mat and Perrin apparently felt the same; Mat was scratching surreptitiously.

“Master Fitch,” Moiraine said, “I understand there are Children of the Light in Baerlon. Is there likely to be trouble?”

“Oh, never you worry about them, Mistress Alys. They’re up to their usual tricks. Claim there’s an Aes Sedai in the town.” Moiraine lifted an eyebrow, and the innkeeper spread his plump hands. “Don’t you worry. They’ve tried it before. There’s no Aes Sedai in Baerlon, and the Governor knows it. The Whitecloaks think if they show an Aes Sedai, some woman they claim is an Aes Sedai, people will let all of them inside the walls. Well, I suppose some would. Some would. But most people know what the Whitecloaks are up to, and they support the Governor. No one wants to see some harmless old woman hurt just so the Children can have an excuse for whipping up a frenzy.”

“I am glad to hear it,” Moiraine said dryly. She put a hand on the innkeeper’s arm. “Is Min still here? I wish to talk with her, if she is.”

Master Fitch’s answer was lost to Rand in the arrival of attendants to lead them to the baths. Moiraine and Egwene vanished behind a plump woman with a ready smile and an armload of towels. The gleeman and Rand and his friends found themselves following a slight, dark-haired fellow, Ara by name.

Rand tried asking Ara about Baerlon, but the man barely said two words together except to say Rand had a funny accent, and then the first sight of the bath chamber drove all thoughts of talk right out of Rand’s head. A dozen tall, copper bathtubs sat in a circle on the tiled floor, which sloped down slightly to a drain in the center of the big stone-walled room. A thick towel, neatly folded, and a large cake of yellow soap sat on a stool

behind each tub, and big black iron cauldrons of water stood heating over fires along one wall. On the opposite wall logs blazing in a deep fireplace added to the general warmth.

"Almost as good as the Winespring Inn back home," Perrin said loyally, if not exactly with a great attention to truth.

Thom barked a laugh, and Mat sniggered, "Sounds like we brought a Coplin with us and didn't know it."

Rand shrugged out of his cloak and stripped off his clothes while Ara filled four of the copper tubs. None of the others was far behind Rand in choosing a bathtub. Once their clothes were all in piles on the stools, Ara brought them each a large bucket of hot water and a dipper. That done, he sat on a stool by the door, leaning back against the wall with his arms crossed, apparently lost in his own thoughts.

There was little in the way of conversation while they lathered and sluiced away a week of grime with dippers of steaming water. Then it was into the tubs for a long soak; Ara had made the water hot enough that settling in was a slow process of luxuriant sighs. The air in the room went from warm to misty and hot. For a long time there was no sound except the occasional long, relaxing exhalation as tight muscles loosened and a chill that they had come to think permanent was drawn out of their bones.

"Need anything else?" Ara asked suddenly. He did not have much room to talk about people's accents; he and Master Fitch both sounded as if they had a mouth full of mush. "More towels? More hot water?"

"Nothing," Thom said in his reverberant voice. Eyes closed, he gave an indolent wave of his hand. "Go and enjoy the evening. At a later time I will see that you receive more than adequate recompense for your services." He settled lower in the tub, until the water covered everything but his eyes and nose.

Ara's eyes went to the stools behind the tubs, where their clothes and belongings were stacked. He glanced at the bow, but lingered longest over Rand's sword and Perrin's axe. "Is there trouble downcountry, too?" he said abruptly. "In the Rivers, or whatever you call it?"

"The Two Rivers," Mat said, pronouncing each separate word distinctly. "It's the Two Rivers. As for trouble, why—"

"What do you mean, too?" Rand asked. "Is there some kind of trouble here?"

Perrin, enjoying his soak, murmured, "Good! Good!" Thom raised himself back up a little, and opened his eyes.

"Here?" Ara snorted. "Trouble? Miners having fistfights in the streets

in the dark of the morning aren't trouble. Or. . . ." He stopped and eyed them a moment. "I meant the Ghealdan kind of trouble," he said finally. "No, I suppose not. Nothing but sheep downcountry, is there? No offense. I just meant it's quiet down there. Still, it's been a strange winter. Strange things in the mountains. I heard the other day there were Trollocs up in Saldaea. But that's the Borderlands then, isn't it?" He finished with his mouth still open, then snapped it shut, appearing surprised that he had said so much.

Rand had tensed at the word *Trollocs*, and tried to hide it by wringing his washcloth out over his head. As the fellow went on he relaxed, but not everyone kept his mouth shut.

"Trollocs?" Mat chortled. Rand splashed water at him, but Mat just wiped it off of his face with a grin. "You just let me tell you about Trollocs."

For the first time since climbing into his tub, Thom spoke. "Why don't you not? I am a little tired of hearing my own stories back from you."

"He's a gleeman," Perrin said, and Ara gave him a scornful look.

"I saw the cloak. You going to perform?"

"Just a minute," Mat protested. "What's this about me telling Thom's stories? Are you all—?"

"You just don't tell them as well as Thom," Rand cut him off hastily, and Perrin hopped in. "You keep adding in things, trying to make it better, and they never do."

"And you get it all mixed up, too," Rand added. "Best leave it to Thom."

They were all talking so fast that Ara stared at them with his mouth hanging open. Mat stared, too, as if everyone else had suddenly gone crazy. Rand wondered how to shut him up short of jumping on him.

The door banged open to admit Lan, brown cloak slung over one shoulder, along with a gust of cooler air that momentarily thinned the mist.

"Well," the Warder said, rubbing his hands, "this is what I have been waiting for." Ara picked up a bucket, but Lan waved it away. "No, I will see to myself." Dropping his cloak on one of the stools, he bundled the bath attendant out of the room, despite the fellow's protests, and shut the door firmly after him. He waited there a moment, his head cocked to listen, and when he turned back to the rest of them his voice was stony and his eyes stabbed at Mat. "It's a good thing I got back when I did, farmboy. Don't you listen to what you are told?"

"I didn't do anything," Mat protested. "I was just going to tell him about the Trollocs, not about. . . ." He stopped, and leaned back from the Warder's eyes, flat against the back of the tub.

"Don't talk about Trollocs," Lan said grimly. "Don't even think about Trollocs." With an angry snort he began filling himself a bathtub. "Blood and ashes, you had better remember, the Dark One has eyes and ears where you least expect. And if the Children of the Light heard Trollocs were after you, they'd be burning to get their hands on you. To them, it would be as much as naming you Darkfriend. It may not be what you are used to, but until we get where we are going, keep your trust small unless Mistress Alys or I tell you differently." At his emphasis on the name Moiraine was using, Mat flinched.

"There was something that fellow wouldn't tell us," Rand said. "Something he thought was trouble, but he wouldn't say what it was."

"Probably the Children," Lan said, pouring more hot water into his tub. "Most people consider them trouble. Some don't, though, and he did not know you well enough to risk it. You might have gone running to the Whitecloaks, for all he knew."

Rand shook his head; this place already sounded worse than Taren Ferry could possibly be.

"He said there were Trollocs in . . . in Saldaea, wasn't it?" Perrin said.

Lan hurled his empty bucket to the floor with a crash. "You will talk about it, won't you? There are always Trollocs in the Borderlands, blacksmith. Just you put it in the front of your mind that we want no more attention than mice in a field. Concentrate on that. Moiraine wants to get you all to Tar Valon alive, and I will do it if it can be done, but if you bring any harm to her. . . ."

The rest of their bathing was done in silence, and dressing afterwards, too.

When they left the bath chamber, Moiraine was standing at the end of the hall with a slender girl not much taller than herself. At least, Rand thought it was a girl, though her dark hair was cut short and she wore a man's shirt and trousers. Moiraine said something, and the girl looked at the men sharply, then nodded to Moiraine and hurried away.

"Well, now," Moiraine said as they drew closer, "I am sure a bath has given you all an appetite. Master Fitch has given us a private dining room." She talked on inconsequentially as she turned to lead the way, about their rooms and the crowding in the town, and how the innkeeper hoped Thom would favor the common room with some music and a story or two. She never mentioned the girl, if girl it had been.

The private dining room had a polished oak table with a dozen chairs around it, and a thick rug on the floor. As they entered, Egwene, freshly

gleaming hair combed out around her shoulders, turned from warming her hands at the fire crackling on the hearth. Rand had had plenty of time for thought during the long silence in the bath chamber. Lan's constant admonitions not to trust anyone, and especially Ara being afraid to trust them, had made him think of just how alone they really were. It seemed they could not trust anyone but themselves, and he was still not too sure how far they could trust Moiraine, or Lan. Just themselves. And Egwene was still Egwene. Moiraine said it would have happened to her anyway, this touching the True Source. She had no control over it, and that meant it was not her fault. And she was still Egwene.

He opened his mouth to apologize, but Egwene stiffened and turned her back before he could get a word out. Staring sullenly at her back, he swallowed what he had been going to say. *All right, then. If she wants to be like that, there's nothing I can do.*

Master Fitch bustled in then, followed by four women in white aprons as long as his, with a platter holding three roast chickens and others bearing silver, and pottery dishes, and covered bowls. The women began setting the table immediately, while the innkeeper bowed to Moiraine.

"My apologies, Mistress Alys, for making you wait like this, but with so many people in the inn, it's a wonder anybody gets served at all. I am afraid the food isn't what it should be, either. Just the chickens, and some turnips and henpeas, with a little cheese for after. No, it just isn't what it should be. I truly do apologize."

"A feast." Moiraine smiled. "For these troubled times, a feast indeed, Master Fitch."

The innkeeper bowed again. His wispy hair, sticking out in all directions as if he constantly ran his hands through it, made the bow comical, but his grin was so pleasant that anyone who laughed would be laughing with him, not at him. "My thanks, Mistress Alys. My thanks." As he straightened he frowned and wiped an imagined bit of dust from the table with a corner of his apron. "It isn't what I would have laid before you a year ago, of course. Not nearly. The winter. Yes. The winter. My cellars are emptying out, and the market is all but bare. And who can blame the farm folk? Who? There's certainly no telling when they'll harvest another crop. No telling at all. It's the wolves get the mutton and beef that should go on people's tables, and. . . ."

Abruptly he seemed to realize that this was hardly the conversation to settle his guests to a comfortable meal. "How I do run on. Full of old wind, that's me. Old wind. Mari, Cinda, let these good people eat in peace." He

made shooing gestures at the women and, as they scurried from the room, swung back to bow to Moiraine yet again. "I hope you enjoy your meal, Mistress Alys. If there's anything else you need, just speak it, and I will fetch it. Just you speak it. It is a pleasure serving you and Master Andra. A pleasure." He gave one more deep bow and was gone, closing the door softly behind him.

Lan had slouched against the wall through all of this as if half asleep. Now he leaped up and was at the door in two long strides. Pressing an ear to a door panel, he listened intently for a slow count of thirty, then snatched open the door and stuck his head into the hall. "They're gone," he said at last, closing the door. "We can talk safely."

"I know you say not to trust anyone," Egwene said, "but if you suspect the innkeeper, why stay here?"

"I suspect him no more than anyone else," Lan replied. "But then, until we reach Tar Valon, I suspect everyone. There, I'll suspect only half."

Rand started to smile, thinking the Warder was making a joke. Then he realized there was not a trace of humor on Lan's face. He really would suspect people in Tar Valon. Was anywhere safe?

"He exaggerates," Moiraine told them soothingly. "Master Fitch is a good man, honest and trustworthy. But he does like to talk, and with the best will in the world he might let something slip to the wrong ear. And I have never yet stopped at an inn where half the maids did not listen at doors and spend more time gossiping than making beds. Come, let us be seated before our meal gets cold."

They took places around the table, with Moiraine at the head and Lan at the foot, and for a while everyone was too busy filling their plates for talk. It might not have been a feast, but after close to a week of flatbread and dried meat, it tasted like one.

After a time, Moiraine asked, "What did you learn in the common room?" Knives and forks stilled, suspended in midair, and all eyes turned to the Warder.

"Little that's good," Lan replied. "Avin was right, at least as far as talk has it. There was a battle in Ghealdan, and Logain was the victor. A dozen different stories are floating about, but they all agree on that."

Logain? That must be the false Dragon. It was the first time Rand had heard a name put to the man. Lan sounded almost as if he knew him.

"The Aes Sedai?" Moiraine asked quietly, and Lan shook his head.

"I don't know. Some say they were all killed, some say none." He snorted.



"Some even say they went over to Logain. There's nothing reliable, and I did not care to show too much interest."

"Yes," Moiraine said. "Little that is good." With a deep breath she brought her attention back to the table. "And what of our own circumstances?"

"There, the news is better. No odd happenings, no strangers around who might be Myrddraal, certainly no Trollocs. And the Whitecloaks are busy trying to make trouble for Governor Adan because he won't cooperate with them. They will not even notice us unless we advertise ourselves."

"Good," Moiraine said. "That agrees with what the bath maid said. Gossip does have its points. Now," she addressed the entire company, "we have a long journey still ahead of us, but the last week has not been easy, either, so I propose to remain here tonight and tomorrow night, and leave early the following morning." All the younger folk grinned; a city for the first time. Moiraine smiled, but she still said, "What does Master Andra say to that?"

Lan eyed the grinning faces flatly. "Well enough, if they remember what I've told them for a change."

Thom snorted through his mustaches. "These country folk loose in a . . . a city." He snorted again and shook his head.

With the crowding at the inn there were only three rooms to be had, one for Moiraine and Egwene, and two to take the men. Rand found himself sharing with Lan and Thom, on the fourth floor at the back, close up under the overhanging eaves, with a single small window that overlooked the stableyard. Full night had fallen, and light from the inn made a pool outside. It was a small room to begin, and an extra bed set up for Thom made it smaller, though all three were narrow. And hard, Rand found when he threw himself down on his. Definitely not the best room.

Thom stayed only long enough to uncase his flute and harp, then left already practicing grand poses. Lan went with him.

It was strange, Rand thought as he shifted uncomfortably on the bed. A week ago he would have been downstairs like a falling rock for just the chance he might see a gleeman perform, for just the rumor of it. But he had heard Thom tell his stories every night for a week, and Thom would be there tomorrow night, and the next, and the hot bath had loosened kinks in muscles that he had thought would be there forever, and his first hot meal in a week oozed lethargy into him. Sleepily he wondered if Lan really did know the false Dragon, Logain. A muffled shout came from

belowstairs, the common room greeting Thom's arrival, but Rand was already asleep.

The stone hallway was dim and shadowy, and empty except for Rand. He could not tell where the light came from, what little there was of it; the gray walls were bare of candles or lamps, nothing at all to account for the faint glow that seemed to just be there. The air was still and dank, and somewhere in the distance water dripped with a steady, hollow plonk. Wherever this was, it was not the inn. Frowning, he rubbed at his forehead. Inn? His head hurt, and thoughts were hard to hold on to. There had been something about . . . an inn? It was gone, whatever it was.

He licked his lips and wished he had something to drink. He was awfully thirsty, dry-as-dust thirsty. It was the dripping sound that decided him. With nothing to choose by except his thirst, he started toward that steady *plonk—plonk—plonk*.

The hallway stretched on, without any crossing corridor and without the slightest change in appearance. The only features at all were the rough doors set at regular intervals in pairs, one on either side of the hall, the wood splintered and dry despite the damp in the air. The shadows receded ahead of him, staying the same, and the dripping never came any closer. After a long time he decided to try one of those doors. It opened easily, and he stepped through into a grim, stone-walled chamber.

One wall opened in a series of arches onto a gray stone balcony, and beyond that was a sky such as he had never seen. Striated clouds in blacks and grays, reds and oranges, streamed by as if storm winds drove them, weaving and interweaving endlessly. *No one* could ever have seen a sky like that; it could not exist.

He pulled his eyes away from the balcony, but the rest of the room was no better. Odd curves and peculiar angles, as if the chamber had been melted almost haphazardly out of the stone, and columns that seemed to grow out of the gray floor. Flames roared on the hearth like a forge-fire with the bellows pumping, but gave no heat. Strange oval stones made the fireplace; they just looked like stones, wet-slick despite the fire, when he looked straight at them, but when he glimpsed them from the corner of his eye they seemed to be faces instead, the faces of men and women writhing in anguish, screaming silently. The high-backed chairs and the polished table in the middle of the room were perfectly ordinary, but that in itself emphasized the rest. A single mirror hung on the wall, but that was not ordinary

at all. When he looked at it he saw only a blur where his reflection should have been. Everything else in the room was shown true, but not him.

A man stood in front of the fireplace. He had not noticed the man when he first came in. If he had not known it was impossible, he would have said no one had been there until he actually looked at the man. Dressed in dark clothes of a fine cut, he seemed in the prime of his maturity, and Rand supposed women would have found him good-looking.

"Once more we meet face-to-face," the man said and, just for an instant, his mouth and eyes became openings into endless caverns of flame.

With a yell Rand hurled himself backwards out of the room, so hard that he stumbled across the hall and banged into the door there, knocking it open. He twisted and grabbed at the doorhandle to keep from falling to the floor—and found himself staring wide-eyed into a stone room with an impossible sky through the arches leading to a balcony, and a fireplace. . . .

"You cannot get away from me that easily," the man said.

Rand twisted, scrambling back out of the room, trying to regain his feet without slowing down. This time there was no corridor. He froze half crouched not far from the polished table, and looked at the man by the fireplace. It was better than looking at the fireplace stones, or at the sky.

"This is a dream," he said as he straightened. Behind him he heard the click of the door closing. "It's some kind of nightmare." He shut his eyes, thinking about waking up. When he was a child the Wisdom had said if you could do that in a nightmare, it would go away. *The . . . Wisdom? What?* If only his thoughts would stop sliding away. If only his head would stop hurting, then he could think straight.

He opened his eyes again. The room was still as it had been, the balcony, the sky. The man by the fireplace.

"Is it a dream?" the man said. "Does it matter?" Once again, for a moment, his mouth and eyes became peepholes into a furnace that seemed to stretch forever. His voice did not change; he did not seem to notice it happening at all.

Rand jumped a little this time, but he managed to keep from yelling. *This is a dream. It has to be.* All the same, he stepped backwards all the way to the door, never taking his eyes off the fellow by the fire, and tried the handle. It did not move; the door was locked.

"You seem thirsty," the man by the fire said. "Drink."

On the table was a goblet, shining gold and ornamented with rubies and amethysts. It had not been there before. He wished he could stop jumping. It was only a dream. His mouth felt like dust.

"I am, a little," he said, picking up the goblet. The man leaned forward intently, one hand on the back of a chair, watching him. The smell of spiced wine drove home to Rand just how thirsty he was, as if he had had nothing to drink in days. *Have I?*

With the wine halfway to his mouth, he stopped. Whispers of smoke were rising from the chairback between the man's fingers. And those eyes watched him so sharply, flickering rapidly in and out of flames.

Rand licked his lips and put the wine back on the table, untasted. "I'm not as thirsty as I thought." The man straightened abruptly, his face without expression. His disappointment could not have been more plain if he had cursed. Rand wondered what was in the wine. But that was a stupid question, of course. This was all a dream. *Then why won't it stop?* "What do you want?" he demanded. "Who are you?"

Flames rose in the man's eyes and mouth; Rand thought he could hear them roar. "Some call me Ba'alzamon."

Rand found himself facing the door, jerking frantically at the handle. All thought of dreams had vanished. The Dark One. The doorhandle would not budge, but he kept twisting.

"Are you the one?" Ba'alzamon said suddenly. "You cannot hide it from me forever. You cannot even hide yourself from me, not on the highest mountain or in the deepest cave. I know you down to the smallest hair."

Rand turned to face the man—to face Ba'alzamon. He swallowed hard. A nightmare. He reached back to give the door-handle one last pull, then stood up straighter.

"Are you expecting glory?" Ba'alzamon said. "Power? Did they tell you the Eye of the World would serve you? What glory or power is there for a puppet? The strings that move you have been centuries weaving. Your father was chosen by the White Tower, like a stallion roped and led to his business. Your mother was no more than a brood mare to their plans. And those plans lead to your death."

Rand's hands knotted in fists. "My father is a good man, and my mother was a good woman. Don't you talk about them!"

The flames laughed. "So there is some spirit in you after all. Perhaps you *are* the one. Little good it will do you. The Amyrlin Seat will use you until you are consumed, just as Davian was used, and Yurian Stonebow, and Guaire Amalasan, and Raolin Darksbane. Just as Logain is being used. Used until there is nothing left of you."

"I don't know. . . ." Rand swung his head from side to side. That one moment of clear thinking, born in anger, was gone. Even as he groped for

it again he could not remember how he had reached it the first time. His thoughts spun around and around. He seized one like a raft in the whirlpool. He forced the words out, his voice strengthening the further he went. "You . . . are bound . . . in Shayol Ghul. You and all the Forsaken . . . bound by the Creator until the end of time."

"The end of time?" Ba'alzamon mocked. "You live like a beetle under a rock, and you think your slime is the universe. The death of time will bring me power such as you could not dream of, worm."

"You are bound—"

"Fool, I have never been bound!" The fires of his face roared so hot that Rand stepped back, sheltering behind his hands. The sweat on his palms dried from the heat. "I stood at Lews Therin Kinslayer's shoulder when he did the deed that named him. It was I who told him to kill his wife, and his children, and all his blood, and every living person who loved him or whom he loved. It was I who gave him the moment of sanity to know what he had done. Have you ever heard a man scream his soul away, worm? He could have struck at me, then. He could not have won, but he could have tried. Instead he called down his precious One Power upon himself, so much that the earth split open and reared up Dragonmount to mark his tomb.

"A thousand years later I sent the Trollocs ravaging south, and for three centuries they savaged the world. Those blind fools in Tar Valon said I was beaten in the end, but the Second Covenant, the Covenant of the Ten Nations, was shattered beyond remaking, and who was left to oppose me then? I whispered in Artur Hawkwing's ear, and the length and breadth of the land Aes Sedai died. I whispered again, and the High King sent his armies across the Aryth Ocean, across the World Sea, and sealed two dooms. The doom of his dream of one land and one people, and a doom yet to come. At his deathbed I was there when his councilors told him only Aes Sedai could save his life. I spoke, and he ordered his councilors to the stake. I spoke, and the High King's last words were to cry that Tar Valon must be destroyed.

"When men such as these could not stand against me, what chance do you have, a toad crouching beside a forest puddle. You will serve me, or you will dance on Aes Sedai strings until you die. And then you *will* be mine. The dead belong to me!"

"No," Rand muttered, "this is a dream. It is a dream!"

"Do you think you are safe from me in your dreams? Look!" Ba'alzamon pointed commandingly, and Rand's head turned to follow, although he did not turn it; he did not want to turn.

The goblet was gone from the table. Where it had been, crouched a large rat, blinking at the light, sniffing the air warily. Ba'alzamon crooked his finger, and with a squeak the rat arched its back, forepaws lifting into the air while it balanced awkwardly on its hind feet. The finger curved more, and the rat toppled over, scrabbling frantically, pawing at nothing, squealing shrilly, its back bending, bending, bending. With a sharp snap like the breaking of a twig, the rat trembled violently and was still, lying bent almost double.

Rand swallowed. "Anything can happen in a dream," he mumbled. Without looking he swung his fist back against the door again. His hand hurt, but he still did not wake up.

"Then go to the Aes Sedai. Go to the White Tower and tell them. Tell the Amyrlin Seat of this . . . dream." The man laughed; Rand felt the heat of the flames on his face. "That is one way to escape them. They will not use you, then. No, not when they know that I know. But will they let you live, to spread the tale of what they do? Are you a big enough fool to believe they will? The ashes of many like you are scattered on the slopes of Dragonmount."

"This is a dream," Rand said, panting. "It's a dream, and I am going to wake up."

"Will you?" Out of the corner of his eye he saw the man's finger move to point at him. "Will you, indeed?" The finger crooked, and Rand screamed as he arched backwards, every muscle in his body forcing him further. "Will you ever wake again?"

Convulsively Rand jerked up in the darkness, his hands tightening on cloth. A blanket. Pale moonlight shone through the single window. The shadowed shapes of the other two beds. A snore from one of them, like canvas ripping: Thom Merrilin. A few coals gleamed among the ashes on the hearth.

It had been a dream, then, like that nightmare in the Winespring Inn the day of Bel Tine, everything that he had heard and done all jumbled in together with old tales and nonsense from nowhere. He pulled the blanket up around his shoulders, but it was not cold that made him shake. His head hurt, too. Perhaps Moiraine could do something to stop these dreams. *She said she could help with nightmares.*

With a snort he lay back. Were the dreams really bad enough for him to ask the help of an Aes Sedai? On the other hand, could anything he did

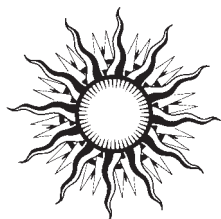
now get him in any deeper? He had left the Two Rivers, come away with an Aes Sedai. But there had not been any choice, of course. So did he have any choice but to trust her? An Aes Sedai? It was as bad as the dreams, thinking about it. He huddled under his blanket, trying to find the calmness of the void the way Tam had taught him, but sleep was a long time returning.



# CHAPTER

# 15

---



## *Strangers and Friends*

Sunlight streaming across his narrow bed finally woke Rand out of a deep but restless sleep. He pulled a pillow over his head, but it did not really shut out the light, and he did not really want to go back to sleep. There had been more dreams after the first. He could not remember any but the first, but he knew he wanted no more.

With a sigh he tossed the pillow aside and sat up, wincing as he stretched. All the aches he thought had soaked out in the bath were back. And his head still hurt, too. It did not surprise him. A dream like that was enough to give anybody a headache. The others had already faded, but not that one.

The other beds were empty. Light poured in through the window at a steep angle; the sun stood well above the horizon. By this hour back on the farm he would have already fixed something to eat and been well into his chores. He scrambled out of bed, muttering angrily to himself. A city to see, and they did not even wake him. At least someone had seen that there was water in the pitcher, and still warm, too.

He washed and dressed quickly, hesitating a moment over Tam's sword. Lan and Thom had left their saddlebags and blanketrolls behind in the room, of course, but the Warder's sword was nowhere to be seen. Lan had worn his sword in Emond's Field even before there was any hint of trouble. He thought he would take the older man's lead. Telling himself it was not



because he had often daydreamed about walking the streets of a real city wearing a sword, he belted it on and tossed his cloak over his shoulder like a sack.

Taking the stairs two at a time, he hurried down to the kitchen. That was surely the quickest place to get a bite, and on his only day in Baerlon he did not want to waste any more time than he already had. *Blood and ashes, but they could have waked me.*

Master Fitch was in the kitchen, confronting a plump woman whose arms were covered in flour to her elbows, obviously the cook. Rather, she was confronting him, shaking her finger under his nose. Serving maids and scullions, potboys and spitboys, hurried about their tasks, elaborately ignoring what was going on in front of them.

"... my Cirri is a good cat," the cook was saying sharply, "and I won't hear a word otherwise, do you hear? Complaining about him doing his job too well, that's what you're doing, if you ask me."

"I have had complaints," Master Fitch managed to get in. "Complaints, mistress. Half the guests—"

"I won't hear of it. I just won't hear of it. If they want to complain about my cat, let *them* do the cooking. My poor old cat, who's just doing his job, and me, we'll go somewhere where we're appreciated, see if we don't." She untied her apron and started to lift it over her head.

"No!" Master Fitch yelled, and leaped to stop her. They danced in a circle with the cook trying to take her apron off and the innkeeper trying to put it back on her. "No, Sara," he panted. "There's no need for this. No need, I say! What would I do without you? Cirri's a fine cat. An excellent cat. He's the best cat in Baerlon. If anyone else complains, I'll tell them to be thankful the cat is doing his job. Yes, thankful. You mustn't go. Sara? Sara!"

The cook stopped their circling and managed to snatch her apron free of him. "All right, then. All right." Clutching the apron in both hands, she still did not retie it. "But if you expect me to have anything ready for mid-day, you'd best get out of here and let me get to it. This may be your inn, but it's my kitchen. Unless you want to do the cooking?" She made as if to hand the apron to him.

Master Fitch stepped back with his hands spread wide. He opened his mouth, then stopped, looking around for the first time. The kitchen help still studiously ignored the cook and the innkeeper, and Rand began an intensive search of his coat pockets, though except for the coin Moiraine had given him there was nothing in them but a few coppers and a handful

of odds and ends. His pocket knife and sharpening stone. Two spare bow-strings and a piece of string he had thought might be useful.

"I am sure, Sara," Master Fitch said carefully, "that everything will be up to your usual excellence." With that he took one last suspicious look at the kitchen help, then left with as much dignity as he could manage.

Sara waited until he was gone before briskly tying her apron strings again, then fastened her eye on Rand. "I suppose you want something to eat, eh? Well, come on in." She gave him a quick grin. "I don't bite, I don't, no matter what you may have seen as you shouldn't. Ciel, get the lad some bread and cheese and milk. That's all there is right now. Sit yourself, lad. Your friends have all gone out, except one lad I understand wasn't feeling well, and I expect you'll be wanting to do the same."

One of the serving maids brought a tray while Rand took a stool at the table. He began eating as the cook went back to kneading her bread dough, but she was not finished talking.

"You mustn't take any mind of what you saw, now. Master Fitch is a good enough man, though the best of you aren't any bargains. It's the folk complaining as has him on edge, and what do they have to complain about? Would they rather find live rats than dead ones? Though it isn't like Cirri to leave his handiwork behind. And over a dozen? Cirri wouldn't let so many get into the inn, he wouldn't. It's a clean place, too, and not one to be so troubled. And all with backs broken." She shook her head at the strangeness of it all.

The bread and cheese turned to ashes in Rand's mouth. "Their backs were broken?"

The cook waved a floury hand. "Think on happier things, that's my way of looking. There's a gleeman, you know. In the common room right this minute. But then, you came with him, didn't you? You are one of those as came with Mistress Alys last evening, aren't you? I thought you were. I won't get much chance to see this gleeman myself, I'm thinking, not with the inn as full as it is, and most of them rifferaff down from the mines." She gave the dough an especially heavy thump. "Not the sort we'd let in most times, only the whole town is filled up with them. Better than some they could be, though, I suppose. Why, I haven't seen a gleeman since before the winter, and. . . ."

Rand ate mechanically, not tasting anything, not listening to what the cook said. Dead rats, with their backs broken. He finished his breakfast hastily, stammered his thanks, and hurried out. He had to talk to someone.

The common room of the Stag and Lion shared little except its pur-

pose with the same room at the Winespring Inn. It was twice as wide and three times as long, and colorful pictures of ornate buildings with gardens of tall trees and bright flowers were painted high on the walls. Instead of one huge fireplace, a hearth blazed on each wall, and scores of tables filled the floor, with almost every chair, bench, or stool taken.

Every man among the crowd of patrons with pipes in their teeth and mugs in their fists leaned forward with his attention on one thing: Thom, standing atop a table in the middle of the room, his many-colored cloak tossed over a nearby chair. Even Master Fitch held a silver tankard and a polishing cloth in motionless hands.

“. . . prancing, silver hooves and proud, arched necks,” Thom proclaimed, while somehow seeming not only to be riding a horse, but to be one of a long procession of riders. “Silken manes flutter with tossed heads. A thousand streaming banners whip rainbows against an endless sky. A hundred brazen-throated trumpets shiver the air, and drums rattle like thunder. Wave on wave, cheers roll from watchers in their thousands, roll across the rooftops and towers of Illian, crash and break unheard around the thousand ears of riders whose eyes and hearts shine with their sacred quest. The Great Hunt of the Horn rides forth, rides to seek the Horn of Valere that will summon the heroes of the Ages back from the grave to battle for the Light. . . .”

It was what the gleeman had called Plain Chant, those nights beside the fire on the ride north. Stories, he said, were told in three voices, High Chant, Plain Chant, and Common, which meant simply telling it the way you might tell your neighbor about your crop. Thom told stories in Common, but he did not bother to hide his contempt for the voice.

Rand closed the door without going in and slumped against the wall. He would get no advice from Thom. Moiraine—what *would* she do if she knew?

He became aware of people staring at him as they passed, and realized he was muttering under his breath. Smoothing his coat, he straightened. He had to talk to somebody. The cook had said one of the others had not gone out. It was an effort not to run.

When he rapped on the door of the room where the other boys had slept and poked his head in, only Perrin was there, lying on his bed and still not dressed. He twisted his head on the pillow to look at Rand, then closed his eyes again. Mat's bow and quiver were propped in the corner.

“I heard you weren't feeling well,” Rand said. He came in and sat on the next bed. “I just wanted to talk. I. . . .” He did not know how to bring

it up, he realized. "If you're sick," he said, half standing, "maybe you ought to sleep. I can go."

"I don't know if I'll ever sleep again." Perrin sighed. "I had a bad dream, if you must know, and couldn't get back to sleep. Mat will be quick enough to tell you. He laughed this morning, when I told them why I was too tired to go out with him, but he dreamed, too. I listened to him for most of the night, tossing and muttering, and you can't tell me he got a good night's sleep." He threw a thick arm across his eyes. "Light, but I'm tired. Maybe if I just stay here for an hour or two, I'll feel like getting up. Mat will never let me hear the end of it if I miss seeing Baerlon because of a dream."

Rand slowly lowered himself to the bed again. He licked his lips, then said quickly, "Did he kill a rat?"

Perrin lowered his arm and stared at him. "You, too?" he said finally. When Rand nodded, he said, "I wish I was back home. He told me . . . he said. . . . What are we going to do? Have you told Moiraine?"

"No. Not yet. Maybe I won't. I don't know. What about you?"

"He said. . . . Blood and ashes, Rand, I don't know." Perrin raised up on his elbow abruptly. "Do you think Mat had the same dream? He laughed, but it sounded forced, and he looked funny when I said I couldn't sleep because of a dream."

"Maybe he did," Rand said. Guiltily, he felt relieved he was not the only one. "I was going to ask Thom for advice. He's seen a lot of the world. You . . . you don't think we should tell Moiraine, do you?"

Perrin fell back on his pillow. "You've heard the stories about Aes Sedai. Do you think we can trust Thom? If we can trust anybody. Rand, if we get out of this alive, if we ever get back home, and you hear me say anything about leaving Emond's Field, even to go as far as Watch Hill, you kick me. All right?"

"That's no way to talk," Rand said. He put on a smile, as cheerful as he could make it. "Of course we'll get home. Come on, get up. We're in a city, and we have a whole day to see it. Where are your clothes?"

"You go. I just want to lie here awhile." Perrin put his arm back across his eyes. "You go ahead. I'll catch you up in an hour or two."

"It's your loss," Rand said as he got up. "Think of what you might miss." He stopped at the door. "Baerlon. How many times have we talked about seeing Baerlon one day?" Perrin lay there with his eyes covered and did not say a word. After a minute Rand stepped out and closed the door behind him.

In the hallway he leaned against the wall, his smile fading. His head

still hurt; it was worse, not better. He could not work up much enthusiasm for Baerlon, either, not now. He could not summon enthusiasm about anything.

A chambermaid came by, her arms full of sheets, and gave him a concerned look. Before she could speak he moved off down the hall, shrugging into his cloak. Thom would not be finished in the common room for hours yet. He might as well see what he could. Perhaps he could find Mat, and see if Ba'alzamon had been in his dreams, too. He went downstairs more slowly this time, rubbing his temple.

The stairs ended near the kitchen, so he took that way out, nodding to Sara but hurrying on when she seemed about to take up where she had left off. The stableyard was empty except for Mutch, standing in the stable door, and one of the other ostlers carrying a sack on his shoulder into the stable. Rand nodded to Mutch, too, but the stableman gave him a truculent look and went inside. He hoped the rest of the city was more like Sara and less like Mutch. Ready to see what a city was like, he picked up his step.

At the open stableyard gates, he stopped and stared. People packed the street like sheep in a pen, people swathed to the eyes in cloaks and coats, hats pulled down against the cold, weaving in and out at a quick step as though the wind whistling over the rooftops blew them along, elbowing past one another with barely a word or a glance. *All strangers*, he thought. *None of them know each other.*

The smells were strange, too, sharp and sour and sweet all mixed in a hodgepodge that had him rubbing his nose. Even at the height of Festival he had never seen so many people so jammed together. Not even half so many. And this was only one street. Master Fitch and the cook said the whole city was full. The whole city . . . like this?

He backed slowly away from the gate, away from the street full of people. It really was not right to go off and leave Perrin sick in bed. And what if Thom finished his storytelling while Rand was off in the city? The gleeman might go out himself, and Rand needed to talk to someone. Much better to wait a bit. He breathed a sigh of relief as he turned his back on the swarming street.

Going back inside the inn did not appeal to him, though, not with his headache. He sat on an upended barrel against the back of the inn and hoped the cold air might help his head.

Mutch came to the stable door from time to time to stare at him, and even across the stableyard he could make out the fellow's disapproving

scowl. Was it country people the man did not like? Or had he been embarrassed by Master Fitch greeting them after he had tried to chase them off for coming in the back way? *Maybe he's a Darkfriend*, he thought, expecting to chuckle at the idea, but it was not a funny thought. He rubbed his hand along the hilt of Tam's sword. There was not much left that was funny at all.

"A shepherd with a heron-mark sword," said a low, woman's voice. "That's almost enough to make me believe anything. What trouble are you in, downcountry boy?"

Startled, Rand jumped to his feet. It was the crop-haired young woman who had been with Moiraine when he came out of the bath chamber, still dressed in a boy's coat and breeches. She was a little older than he was, he thought, with dark eyes even bigger than Egwene's, and oddly intent.

"You are Rand, aren't you?" she went on. "My name is Min."

"I'm not in trouble," he said. He did not know what Moiraine had told her, but he remembered Lan's admonition not to attract any notice. "What makes you think I'm in trouble? The Two Rivers is a quiet place, and we're all quiet people. No place for trouble, unless it has to do with crops, or sheep."

"Quiet?" Min said with a faint smile. "I've heard men talk about you Two Rivers folk. I've heard the jokes about wooden-headed shepherders, and then there are men who have actually been downcountry."

"Wooden-headed?" Rand said, frowning. "What jokes?"

"The ones who know," she went on as if he had not spoken, "say you walk around all smiles and politeness, just as meek and soft as butter. On the surface, anyway. Underneath, they say, you're all as tough as old oak roots. Prod too hard, they say, and you dig up stone. But the stone isn't buried very deep in you, or in your friends. It's as if a storm has scoured away almost all the covering. Moiraine didn't tell me everything, but I see what I see."

Old oak roots? Stone? It hardly sounded like the sort of thing the merchants or their people would say. That last made him jump, though.

He looked around quickly; the stableyard was empty, and the nearest windows were closed. "I don't know anybody named—what was it again?"

"Mistress Alys, then, if you prefer," Min said with an amused look that made his cheeks color. "There's no one close enough to hear."

"What makes you think Mistress Alys has another name?"

"Because she told me," Min said, so patiently that he blushed again. "Not that she had a choice, I suppose. I saw she was . . . different . . . right

away. When she stopped here before, on her way downcountry. She knew about me. I've talked to . . . others like her before."

"Saw?" Rand said.

"Well, I don't suppose you'll go running to the Children. Not considering who your traveling companions are. The Whitecloaks wouldn't like what I do any more than they like what she does."

"I don't understand."

"She says I see pieces of the Pattern." Min gave a little laugh and shook her head. "Sounds too grand, to me. I just see things when I look at people, and sometimes I know what they mean. I look at a man and a woman who've never even talked to one another, and I know they'll marry. And they do. That sort of thing. She wanted me to look at you. All of you together."

Rand shivered. "And what did you see?"

"When you're all in a group? Sparks swirling around you, thousands of them, and a big shadow, darker than midnight. It's so strong, I almost wonder why everybody can't see it. The sparks are trying to fill the shadow, and the shadow is trying to swallow the sparks." She shrugged. "You are all tied together in something dangerous, but I can't make any more of it."

"All of us?" Rand muttered. "Egwene, too? But they weren't after—I mean—"

Min did not seem to notice his slip. "The girl? She's part of it. And the gleeman. All of you. You're in love with her." He stared at her. "I can tell that even without seeing any images. She loves you, too, but she's not for you, or you for her. Not the way you both want."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"When I look at her, I see the same as when I look at . . . Mistress Alys. Other things, things I don't understand, too, but I know what *that* means. She won't refuse it."

"This is all foolishness," Rand said uncomfortably. His headache was fading to numbness; his head felt packed with wool. He wanted to get away from this girl and the things she saw. And yet. . . . "What do you see when you look at . . . the rest of us?"

"All sorts of things," Min said, with a grin as if she knew what he really wanted to ask. "The War . . . ah . . . Master Andra has seven ruined towers around his head, and a babe in a cradle holding a sword, and. . . ." She shook her head. "Men like him—you understand?—always have so many images they crowd one another. The strongest images around the gleeman are a man—not him—juggling fire, and the White Tower, and that doesn't make any sense at all for a man. The strongest things I see



about the big, curly-haired fellow are a wolf, and a broken crown, and trees flowering all around him. And the other one—a red eagle, an eye on a balance scale, a dagger with a ruby, a horn, and a laughing face. There are other things, but you see what I mean. This time I can't make up or down out of any of it." She waited then, still grinning, until he finally cleared his throat and asked.

"What about me?"

Her grin stopped just short of outright laughter. "The same kind of things as the rest. A sword that isn't a sword, a golden crown of laurel leaves, a beggar's staff, you pouring water on sand, a bloody hand and a white-hot iron, three women standing over a funeral bier with you on it, black rock wet with blood—"

"All right," he broke in uneasily. "You don't have to list it all."

"Most of all, I see lightning around you, some striking at you, some coming out of you. I don't know what any of it means, except for one thing. You and I will meet again." She gave him a quizzical look, as if she did not understand that either.

"Why shouldn't we?" he said. "I'll be coming back this way on my way home."

"I suppose you will, at that." Suddenly her grin was back, wry and mysterious, and she patted his cheek. "But if I told you everything I saw, you'd be as curly-haired as your friend with the shoulders."

He jerked back from her hand as if it were red-hot. "What do you mean? Do you see anything about rats? Or dreams?"

"Rats! No, no rats. As for dreams, maybe it's your idea of a dream, but I never thought it was mine."

He wondered if she was crazy, grinning like that. "I have to go," he said, edging around her. "I . . . I have to meet my friends."

"Go, then. But you won't escape."

He didn't exactly break into a run, but every step he took was quicker than the step before.

"Run, if you want," she called after him. "You can't escape from me."

Her laughter sped him across the stableyard and out into the street, into the hubbub of people. Her last words were too close to what Ba'alzamon had said. He blundered into people as he hurried through the crowd, earning hard looks and hard words, but he did not slow down until he was several streets away from the inn.

After a time he began to pay attention again to where he was. His head felt like a balloon, but he stared and enjoyed anyway. He thought Baerlon



was a grand city, if not exactly in the same way as cities in Thom's stories. He wandered up broad streets, most paved with flagstone, and down narrow, twisting lanes, wherever chance and the shifting of the crowd took him. It had rained during the night, and the streets that were unpaved had already been churned to mud by the crowds, but muddy streets were nothing new to him. None of the streets in Emond's Field was paved.

There certainly were no palaces, and only a few houses were very much bigger than those back home, but every house had a roof of slate or tile as fine as the roof of the Winespring Inn. He supposed there would be a palace or two in Caemlyn. As for inns, he counted nine, not one smaller than the Winespring and most as large as the Stag and Lion, and there were plenty of streets he had not seen yet.

Shops dotted every street, with awnings out front sheltering tables covered with goods, everything from cloth to books to pots to boots. It was as if a hundred peddlers' wagons had spilled out their contents. He stared so much that more than once he had to hurry on at the suspicious look of a shopkeeper. He had not understood the first shopkeeper's stare. When he did understand, he started to get angry until he remembered that here he was the stranger. He could not have bought much, anyway. He gasped when he saw how many coppers were exchanged for a dozen discolored apples or a handful of shriveled turnips, the sort that would be fed to the horses in the Two Rivers, but people seemed eager to pay.

There were certainly more than enough people, to his estimation. For a while the sheer number of them almost overwhelmed him. Some wore clothes of finer cut than anyone in the Two Rivers—almost as fine as Moiraine's—and quite a few had long, fur-lined coats that flapped around their ankles. The miners everybody at the inn kept talking about, they had the hunched look of men who grubbed underground. But most of the people did not look any different from those he had grown up with, not in dress or in face. He had expected they would, somehow. Indeed, some of them had so much the look of the Two Rivers in their faces that he could imagine they belonged to one family or another that he knew around Emond's Field. A toothless, gray-haired fellow with ears like jug handles, sitting on a bench outside one of the inns and peering mournfully into an empty tankard, could easily have been Bili Congar's close cousin. The lantern-jawed tailor sewing in front of his shop might have been Jon Thane's brother, even to the same bald spot on the back of his head. A near mirror image of Samel Crowe pushed past Rand as he turned a corner, and. . . .

In disbelief he stared at a bony little man with long arms and a big nose, shoving hurriedly through the crowd in clothes that looked like a bundle of rags. The man's eyes were sunken and his dirty face gaunt, as if he had not eaten or slept in days, but Rand could swear. . . . The ragged man saw him then, and froze in mid-step, heedless of people who all but stumbled over him. The last doubt in Rand's mind vanished.

"Master Fain!" he shouted. "We all thought you were—"

As quick as a blink the peddler darted away, but Rand dodged after him, calling apologies over his shoulder to the people he bumped. Through the crowd he just caught sight of Fain dashing into an alleyway, and he turned after.

A few steps into the alleyway the peddler had stopped in his tracks. A tall fence made it into a dead end. As Rand skidded to a halt, Fain rounded on him, crouching warily and backing away. He flapped grimy hands at Rand to stay back. More than one rip showed in his coat, and his cloak was worn and tattered as if it had seen much harder use than it was meant for.

"Master Fain?" Rand said hesitantly. "What is the matter? It's me, Rand al'Thor, from Emond's Field. We all thought the Trollocs had taken you."

Fain gestured sharply and, still in a crouch, ran a few crabbed steps toward the open end of the alley. He did not try to pass Rand, or even come close to him. "Don't!" he rasped. His head shifted constantly as he tried to see everything in the street beyond Rand. "Don't mention"—his voice dropped to a hoarse whisper, and he turned his head away, watching Rand with quick, sidelong glances—"*them*. There be Whitecloaks in the town."

"They have no reason to bother us," Rand said. "Come back to the Stag and Lion with me. I'm staying there with friends. You know most of them. They'll be glad to see you. We all thought you were dead."

"Dead?" the peddler snapped indignantly. "Not Padan Fain. Padan Fain knows which way to jump and where to land." He straightened his rags as if they were feastday clothes. "Always have, and always will. I'll live a long time. Longer than—" Abruptly his face tightened and his hands clutched hold of his coat front. "They burned my wagon, and all my goods. Had no cause to be doing that, did they? I couldn't get to my horses. *My* horses, but that fat old innkeeper had them locked up in his stable. I had to step quick not to get my throat slit, and what did it get me? All that I've got left is what I stand up in. Now, is that fair? Is it, now?"

"Your horses are safe in Master al'Vere's stable. You can get them any time. If you come to the inn with me, I'm sure Moiraine will help you get back to the Two Rivers."

"Aaaaah! She's . . . she's the Aes Sedai, is she?" A guarded look came over Fain's face. "Maybe, though. . . ." He paused, licking his lips nervously. "How long will you be at this—What was it? What did you call it?—the Stag and Lion?"

"We leave tomorrow," Rand said. "But what does that have to do with—?"

"You just don't know," Fain whined, "standing there with a full belly and a good night's sleep in a soft bed. I've hardly slept a wink since that night. My boots are all worn out with running, and as for what I've had to eat. . . ." His face twisted. "I don't want to be within miles of an Aes Sedai," he spat the last words, "not miles and miles, but I may have to. I've no choice, have I? The thought of her eyes on me, of her even knowing where I am. . . ." He reached toward Rand as if he wanted to grab his coat, but his hands stopped short, fluttering, and he actually took a step back. "Promise me you won't tell her. She frightens me. There's no need to be telling her, no reason for an Aes Sedai to even be knowing I'm alive. You have to promise. You have to!"

"I promise," Rand said soothingly. "But there's no reason for you to be afraid of her. Come with me. The least you'll get is a hot meal."

"Maybe. Maybe." Fain rubbed his chin pensively. "Tomorrow, you say? In that time. . . . You won't forget your promise? You won't be letting her . . . ?"

"I won't let her hurt you," Rand said, wondering how he could stop an Aes Sedai, whatever she wanted to do.

"She won't hurt me," Fain said. "No, she won't. I won't be letting her." Like a flash he hared past Rand into the crowd.

"Master Fain!" Rand called. "Wait!"

He dashed out of the alley just in time to catch sight of a ragged coat disappearing around the next corner. Still calling, he ran after it, darted around the corner. He only had time to see a man's back before he crashed into it and they both went down in a heap in the mud.

"Can't you watch where you're going?" came a mutter from under him, and Rand scrambled up in surprise.

"Mat?"

Mat sat up with a baleful glare and began scraping mud off his cloak

with his hands. "You must really be turning into a city man. Sleep all morning and run right over people." Climbing to his feet, he stared at his muddy hands, then muttered and wiped them off on his cloak. "Listen, you'll never guess who I thought I just saw."

"Padan Fain," Rand said.

"Padan Fa— How did you know?"

"I was talking to him, but he ran off."

"So the Tro—" Mat stopped to look around warily, but the crowd was passing them by with never a glance. Rand was glad he had learned a little caution. "So they didn't get him. I wonder why he left Emond's Field, without a word like that? Probably started running then, too, and didn't stop until he got here. But why was he running just now?"

Rand shook his head and wished he had not. It felt as though it might fall off. "I don't know, except that he's afraid of M . . . Mistress Alys." All this watching what you said was not easy. "He doesn't want her to know he's here. He made me promise I wouldn't tell her."

"Well, his secret is safe with me," Mat said. "I wish she didn't know where I was, either."

"Mat?" People still streamed by without paying them any heed, but Rand lowered his voice anyway, and leaned closer. "Mat, did you have a nightmare last night? About a man who killed a rat?"

Mat stared at him without blinking. "You, too?" he said finally. "And Perrin, I suppose. I almost asked him this morning, but. . . . He must have. Blood and ashes! Now somebody's making us dream things. Rand, I wish *nobody* knew where I was."

"There were dead rats all over the inn this morning." He did not feel as afraid at saying it as he would have earlier. He did not feel much of anything. "Their backs were broken." His voice rang in his own ears. If he was getting sick, he might have to go to Moiraine. He was surprised that even the thought of the One Power being used on him did not bother him.

Mat took a deep breath, hitching his cloak, and looked around as if searching for somewhere to go. "What's happening to us, Rand? What?"

"I don't know. I'm going to ask Thom for advice. About whether to tell . . . anyone else."

"No! Not her. Maybe him, but not her."

The sharpness of it took Rand by surprise. "Then you believed him?" He did not need to say which "him" he meant; the grimace on Mat's face said he understood.

"No," Mat said slowly. "It's the chances, that's all. If we tell her, and he was lying, then maybe nothing happens. Maybe. But maybe just him being in our dreams is enough for. . . . I don't know." He stopped to swallow. "If we don't tell her, maybe we'll have some more dreams. Rats or no rats, dreams are better than. . . . Remember the ferry? I say we keep quiet."

"All right." Rand remembered the ferry—and Moiraine's threat, too—but somehow it seemed a long time ago. "All right."

"Perrin won't say anything, will he?" Mat went on, bouncing on his toes. "We have to get back to him. If he tells her, she'll figure it out about all of us. You can bet on it. Come on." He started off briskly through the crowd.

Rand stood there looking after him until Mat came back and grabbed him. At the touch on his arm he blinked, then followed his friend.

"What's the matter with you?" Mat asked. "You going to sleep again?"

"I think I have a cold," Rand said. His head was as tight as a drum, and almost as empty.

"You can get some chicken soup when we get back to the inn," Mat said. He kept up a constant chatter as they hunted through the packed streets. Rand made an effort to listen, and even to say something now and then, but it *was* an effort. He was not tired; he did not want to sleep. He just felt as if he were drifting. After a while he found himself telling Mat about Min.

"A dagger with a ruby, eh?" Mat said. "I like that. I don't know about the eye, though. Are you sure she wasn't making it up? It seems to me she would know what it all means if she really is a soothsayer."

"She didn't say she's a soothsayer," Rand said. "I believe she does see things. Remember, Moiraine was talking to her when we finished our baths. And she knows who Moiraine is."

Mat frowned at him. "I thought we weren't supposed to use that name."

"No," Rand muttered. He rubbed his head with both hands. It was so hard to concentrate on anything.

"I think maybe you really are sick," Mat said, still frowning. Suddenly he pulled Rand to a stop by his coat sleeve. "Look at them."

Three men in breastplates and conical steel caps, burnished till they shone like silver, were making their way down the street toward Rand and Mat. Even the mail on their arms gleamed. Their long cloaks, pristine white and embroidered on the left breast with a golden sunburst, just cleared the mud and puddles of the street. Their hands rested on their sword hilts,

and they looked around them as if looking at things that had wriggled out from under a rotting log. Nobody looked back, though. Nobody even seemed to notice them. Just the same, the three did not have to push through the crowd; the bustle parted to either side of the white-cloaked men as if by happenstance, leaving them to walk in a clear space that moved with them.

"Do you suppose they're Children of the Light?" Mat asked in a loud voice. A passerby looked hard at Mat, then quickened his pace.

Rand nodded. Children of the Light. Whitecloaks. Men who hated Aes Sedai. Men who told people how to live, causing trouble for those who refused to obey. If burned farms and worse could be called as mild as trouble. *I should be afraid*, he thought. *Or curious*. Something, at any rate. Instead he stared at them passively.

"They don't look like so much to me," Mat said. "Full of themselves, though, aren't they?"

"They don't matter," Rand said. "The inn. We have to talk to Perrin."

"Like Eward Congar. He always has his nose in the air, too." Suddenly Mat grinned, a twinkle in his eye. "Remember when he fell off the Wagon Bridge and had to tramp home dripping wet? That took him down a peg for a month."

"What does that have to do with Perrin?"

"See that?" Mat pointed to a cart resting on its shafts in an alleyway just ahead of the Children. A single stake held a dozen stacked barrels in place on the flat bed. "Watch." Laughing, he darted into a cutler's shop to their left.

Rand stared after him, knowing he should do something. That look in Mat's eyes always meant one of his tricks. But oddly, he found himself looking forward to whatever Mat was going to do. Something told him that feeling was wrong, that it was dangerous, but he smiled in anticipation anyway.

In a minute Mat appeared above him, climbing half out of an attic window onto the tile roof of the shop. His sling was in his hands, already beginning to whirl. Rand's eyes went back to the cart. Almost immediately there was a sharp crack, and the stake holding the barrels broke just as the Whitecloaks came abreast of the alley. People jumped out of the way as the barrels rolled down the cart shafts with an empty rumble and jounced into the street, splashing mud and muddy water in every direction. The three Children jumped no less quickly than anyone else, their superior looks replaced by surprise. Some passersby fell down, making more splashes,

but the three moved agilely, avoiding the barrels with ease. They could not avoid the flying mud that splattered their white cloaks, though.

A bearded man in a long apron hurried out of the alley, waving his arms and shouting angrily, but one look at the three trying vainly to shake the mud from their cloaks and he vanished back into the alley even faster than he had come out. Rand glanced up at the shop roof; Mat was gone. It had been an easy shot for any Two Rivers lad, but the effect was certainly all that could be hoped for. He could not help laughing; the humor seemed to be wrapped in wool, but it was still funny. When he turned back to the street, the three Whitecloaks were staring straight at him.

"You find something funny, yes?" The one who spoke stood a little in front of the others. He wore an arrogant, unblinking look, with a light in his eyes as if he knew something important, something no one else knew.

Rand's laughter cut off short. He and the Children were alone with the mud and the barrels. The crowd that had been all around them had found urgent business up or down the street.

"Does fear of the Light hold your tongue?" Anger made the Whitecloak's narrow face seem even more pinched. He glanced dismissively at the sword hilt sticking out from Rand's cloak. "Perhaps you are responsible for this, yes?" Unlike the others he had a golden knot beneath the sunburst on his cloak.

Rand moved to cover the sword, but instead swept his cloak back over his shoulder. In the back of his head was a frantic wonder at what he was doing, but it was a distant thought. "Accidents happen," he said. "Even to the Children of the Light."

The narrow-faced man raised an eyebrow. "You are that dangerous, youngling?" He was not much older than Rand.

"Heron-mark, Lord Bornhald," one of the others said warningly.

The narrow-faced man glanced at Rand's sword hilt again—the bronze heron was plain—and his eyes widened momentarily. Then his gaze rose to Rand's face, and he sniffed dismissively. "He is too young. You are not from this place, yes?" he said coldly to Rand. "You come from where?"

"I just arrived in Baerlon." A tingling thrill ran along Rand's arms and legs. He felt flushed, almost warm. "You wouldn't know of a good inn, would you?"

"You avoid my questions," Bornhald snapped. "What evil is in you that you do not answer me?" His companions moved up to either side of him, faces hard and expressionless. Despite the mudstains on their cloaks, there was nothing funny about them now.



The tingling filled Rand; the heat had grown to a fever. He wanted to laugh, it felt so good. A small voice in his head shouted that something was wrong, but all he could think of was how full of energy he felt, nearly bursting with it. Smiling, he rocked on his heels and waited for what was going to happen. Vaguely, distantly, he wondered what it would be.

The leader's face darkened. One of the others drew his sword enough for an inch of steel to show and spoke in a voice quivering with anger. "When the Children of the Light ask questions, you gray-eyed bumpkin, we expect answers, or—" He cut off as the narrow-faced man threw an arm across his chest. Bornhald jerked his head up the street.

The Town Watch had arrived, a dozen men in round steel caps and studded leather jerkins, carrying quarterstaffs as if they knew how to use them. They stood watching, silently, from ten paces off.

"This town has lost the Light," growled the man who had half drawn his sword. He raised his voice to shout at the Watch. "Baerlon stands in the Shadow of the Dark One!" At a gesture from Bornhald he slammed his blade back into its scabbard.

Bornhald turned his attention back to Rand. The light of knowing burned in his eyes. "Darkfriends do not escape us, youngling, even in a town that stands in the Shadow. We will meet again. You may be sure of it!"

He spun on his heel and strode away, his two companions close behind, as if Rand had ceased to exist. For the moment, at least. When they reached the crowded part of the street, the same seemingly accidental pocket as before opened around them. The Watchmen hesitated, eyeing Rand, then shouldered their quarterstaffs and followed the white-cloaked three. They had to push their way into the crowd, shouting, "Make way for the Watch!" Few did make way, except grudgingly.

Rand still rocked on his heels, waiting. The tingle was so strong that he almost quivered; he felt as if he were burning up.

Mat came out of the shop, staring at him. "You aren't sick," he said finally. "You are crazy!"

Rand drew a deep breath, and abruptly it was all gone like a pricked bubble. He staggered as it vanished, the realization of what he had just done flooding in on him. Licking his lips, he met Mat's stare. "I think we had better go back to the inn, now," he said unsteadily.

"Yes," Mat said. "Yes. I think we better had."

The street had begun to fill up again, and more than one passerby stared at the two boys and murmured something to a companion. Rand



was sure the story would spread. A crazy man had tried to start a fight with three Children of the Light. That was something to talk about. *Maybe the dreams are driving me crazy.*

The two lost their way several times in the haphazard streets, but after a while they fell in with Thom Merrill, making a grand procession all by himself through the throng. The gleeman said he was out to stretch his legs and for a bit of fresh air, but whenever anyone looked twice at his colorful cloak he would announce in a resounding voice, "I am at the Stag and Lion, tonight only."

It was Mat who began disjointedly telling Thom about the dream and their worry over whether or not to tell Moiraine, but Rand joined in, for there were differences in exactly how they remembered it. *Or maybe each dream was a little different*, he thought. The major part of the dreams was the same, though.

They had not gone far in the telling before Thom started paying full attention. When Rand mentioned Ba'alzamon, the gleeman grabbed them each by a shoulder with a command to hold their tongues, raised on tiptoe to look over the heads of the crowd, then hustled them out of the press to a dead-end alley that was empty except for a few crates and a slat-ribbed, yellow dog huddled out of the cold.

Thom stared out at the crowd, looking for anyone stopping to listen, before turning his attention to Rand and Mat. His blue eyes bored into theirs, between flickering away to watch the mouth of the alley. "Don't ever say that name where strangers can hear." His voice was low, but urgent. "Not even where a stranger *might* hear. It is a very dangerous name, even where Children of the Light are not wandering the streets."

Mat snorted. "I could tell you about Children of the Light," he said with a wry look at Rand.

Thom ignored him. "If only one of you had had this dream. . . ." He tugged at his mustache furiously. "Tell me everything you can remember about it. Every detail." He kept up his wary watch while he listened.

"... he named the men he said had been used," Rand said finally. He thought he had told everything else. "Guaire Amalasan. Raolin Darksbane."

"Davian," Mat added before he could go on. "And Yurian Stonebow."

"And Logain," Rand finished.

"Dangerous names," Thom muttered. His eyes seemed to drill at them even more intently than before. "Nearly as dangerous as that other, one way and another. All dead, now, except for Logain. Some long dead. Raolin

Darksbane nearly two thousand years. But dangerous just the same. Best you don't say them aloud even when you're alone. Most people wouldn't recognize a one of them, but if the wrong person overhears. . . ."

"But who were they?" Rand said.

"Men," Thom murmured. "Men who shook the pillars of heaven and rocked the world on its foundations." He shook his head. "It doesn't matter. Forget about them. They are dust now."

"Did the . . . were they used, like he said?" Mat asked. "And killed?"

"You might say the White Tower killed them. You might say that." Thom's mouth tightened momentarily, then he shook his head again. "But used . . . ? No, I cannot see that. The Light knows the Amyrlin Seat has enough plots going, but I can't see that."

Mat shivered. "He said so many things. Crazy things. All that about Lews Therin Kinslayer, and Artur Hawkwing. And the Eye of the World. What in the Light is that supposed to be?"

"A legend," the gleeman said slowly. "Maybe. As big a legend as the Horn of Valere, at least in the Borderlands. Up there, young men go hunting the Eye of the World the way young men from Illian hunt the Horn. Maybe a legend."

"What do we do, Thom?" Rand said. "Do we tell her? I don't want any more dreams like that. Maybe she could do something."

"Maybe we wouldn't like what she did," Mat growled.

Thom studied them, considering and stroking his mustache with a knuckle. "I say hold your peace," he said finally. "Don't tell anyone, for the time, at least. You can always change your mind, if you have to, but once you tell, it's done, and you're tied up worse than ever with . . . with her." Suddenly he straightened, his stoop almost disappearing. "The other lad! You say he had the same dream? Does he have sense enough to keep his mouth shut?"

"I think so," Rand said at the same time that Mat said, "We were going back to the inn to warn him."

"The Light send we're not too late!" Cloak flapping around his ankles, patches fluttering in the wind, Thom strode out of the alley, looking back over his shoulder without stopping. "Well? Are your feet pegged to the ground?"

Rand and Mat hurried after him, but he did not wait for them to catch up. This time he did not pause for people who looked at his cloak, or those who hailed him as a gleeman, either. He clove through the crowded streets as if they were empty, Rand and Mat half running to follow in his wake. In

much less time than Rand expected they were hurrying up to the Stag and Lion.

As they started in, Perrin came speeding out, trying to throw his cloak around his shoulders as he ran. He nearly fell in his effort not to carom into them. "I was coming looking for you two," he panted when he had caught his balance.

Rand grabbed him by the arm. "Did you tell anyone about the dream?"

"Say that you didn't," Mat demanded.

"It's very important," Thom said.

Perrin looked at them in confusion. "No, I haven't. I didn't even get out of bed until less than an hour ago." His shoulders slumped. "I've given myself a headache trying not to think about it, much less talk about it. Why did you tell him?" He nodded at the gleeman.

"We had to talk to somebody or go crazy," Rand said.

"I will explain later," Thom added with a significant look at the people passing in and out of the Stag and Lion.

"All right," Perrin replied slowly, still looking confused. Suddenly he slapped his head. "You almost made me forget why I was looking for you, not that I don't wish I could. Nynaeve is inside."

"Blood and ashes!" Mat yelled. "How did she get here? Moiraine. . . . The ferry. . . ."

Perrin snorted. "You think a little thing like a sunken ferry could stop her? She rooted Hightower out—I don't know how he got back over the river, but she said he was hiding in his bedroom and didn't want to go near the river—anyway, she bullied him into finding a boat big enough for her and her horse and rowing her across. Himself. She only gave him time to find one of his haulers to work another set of oars."

"Light!" Mat breathed.

"What is she doing here?" Rand wanted to know. Mat and Perrin both gave him a scornful look.

"She came after us," Perrin said. "She's with . . . with Mistress Alys right now, and it's cold enough in there to snow."

"Couldn't we just go somewhere else for a while?" Mat asked. "My da says, only a fool puts his hand in a hornet nest until he absolutely has to."

Rand cut in. "She can't make us go back. Winternight should have been enough to make her see that. If she doesn't, we will have to make her."

Mat's eyebrows lifted higher with every word, and when Rand finished he let out a low whistle. "You ever try to make Nynaeve see something she doesn't want to see? I have. I say we stay away till night, and sneak in then."

“From my observation of the young woman,” Thom said, “I don’t think she will stop until she has had her say. If she is not allowed to have it soon, she might keep on until she attracts attention none of us wants.”

That brought them all up short. They exchanged glances, drew deep breaths, and marched inside as if to face Trollocs.



# CHAPTER

## 16

---



### *The Wisdom*

Perrin led the way into the depths of the inn. Rand was so intent on what he intended to say to Nynaeve that he did not see Min until she seized his arm and pulled him to one side. The others kept on a few steps down the hall before realizing he had stopped, then they halted, too, half impatient to go on, half reluctant to do so.

"We don't have time for that, boy," Thom said gruffly.

Min gave the white-haired gleeman a sharp look. "Go juggle something," she snapped, drawing Rand further away from the others.

"I really don't have time," Rand told her. "Certainly not for any more fool talk about escaping and the like." He tried to get his arm loose, but every time he pulled free, she grabbed it again.

"And I don't have time for your foolishness, either. Will you be still!" She gave the others a quick look, then moved closer, lowering her voice. "A woman arrived a little while ago—shorter than I, young, with dark eyes and dark hair in a braid down to her waist. She's part of it, right along with the rest of you."

For a minute Rand just stared at her. *Nynaeve? How can she be involved? Light, how can I be involved?* "That's . . . impossible."

"You know her?" Min whispered.

"Yes, and she can't be mixed in . . . in whatever it is you. . . ."

"The sparks, Rand. She met Mistress Alys coming in, and there were

sparks, with just the two of them. Yesterday I couldn't see sparks without at least three or four of you together, but today it's all sharper, and more furious." She looked at Rand's friends, waiting impatiently, and shivered before turning back to him. "It's almost a wonder the inn doesn't catch fire. You're all in more danger today than yesterday. Since she came."

Rand glanced at his friends. Thom, his brows drawn down in a bushy V, was leaning forward on the point of taking some action to hurry him along. "She won't do anything to hurt us," he told Min. "I have to go, now." He succeeded in getting his arm back, this time.

Ignoring her squawk, he joined the others, and they started off again down the corridor. Rand looked back once. Min shook her fist at him and stamped her foot.

"What did she have to say?" Mat asked.

"Nynaeve is part of it," Rand said without thinking, then shot Mat a hard look that caught him with his mouth open. Then understanding slowly spread across Mat's face.

"Part of what?" Thom said softly. "Does that girl know something?"

While Rand was still trying to gather in his head what to say, Mat spoke up. "Of course she's part of it," he said grumpily. "Part of the same bad luck we've been having since Winternight. Maybe having the Wisdom show up is no great affair to you, but I'd as soon have the Whitecloaks here, myself."

"She saw Nynaeve arrive," Rand said. "Saw her talking to Mistress Alys, and thought she might have something to do with us." Thom gave him a sidelong look and ruffled his mustaches with a snort, but the others seemed to accept Rand's explanation. He did not like keeping secrets from his friends, but Min's secret could be as dangerous for her as any of theirs was for them.

Perrin stopped suddenly in front of a door, and despite his size he seemed oddly hesitant. He drew a deep breath, looked at his companions, took another breath, then slowly opened the door and went in. One by one the rest of them followed. Rand was the last, and he closed the door behind him with the utmost reluctance.

It was the room where they had eaten the night before. A blaze crackled on the hearth, and a polished silver tray sat in the middle of the table holding a gleaming silver pitcher and cups. Moiraine and Nynaeve sat at opposite ends of the table, neither taking her eyes from the other. All the other chairs were empty. Moiraine's hands rested on the table, as still as her face. Nynaeve's braid was thrown over her shoulder, the end gripped in one fist; she kept giv-

ing it little tugs the way she did when she was being even more stubborn than usual with the Village Council. *Perrin was right*. Despite the fire it seemed freezing cold, and all coming from the two women at the table.

Lan was leaning against the mantel, staring into the flames and rubbing his hands for warmth. Egwene, her back flat against the wall, had her cloak on with the hood pulled up. Thom, Mat, and Perrin stopped uncertainly in front of the door.

Shrugging uncomfortably, Rand walked to the table. *Sometimes you have to grab the wolf by the ears*, he reminded himself. But he remembered another old saying, too. *When you have a wolf by the ears, it's as hard to let go as to hold on*. He felt Moiraine's eyes on him, and Nynaeve's, and his face became hot, but he sat down anyway, halfway between the two.

For a minute the room was as still as a carving, then Egwene and Perrin, and finally Mat, made their reluctant way to the table and took seats—toward the middle, with Rand. Egwene tugged her hood further forward, enough to half hide her face, and they all avoided looking at anyone.

"Well," Thom snorted, from his place beside the door. "At least that much is done."

"Since everyone is here," Lan said, leaving the fireplace and filling one of the silver cups with wine, "perhaps you will finally take this." He proffered the cup to Nynaeve; she looked at it suspiciously. "There is no need to be afraid," he said patiently. "You saw the innkeeper bring the wine, and neither of us has had a chance to put anything in it. It is quite safe."

The Wisdom's mouth tightened angrily at the word *afraid*, but she took the cup with a murmured, "Thank you."

"I am interested," he said, "in how you found us."

"So am I." Moiraine leaned forward intently. "Perhaps you are willing to speak now that Egwene and the boys have been brought to you?"

Nynaeve sipped the wine before answering the Aes Sedai. "There was nowhere for you to go except Baerlon. To be safe, though, I followed your trail. You certainly cut back and forth enough. But then, I suppose you would not care to risk meeting decent people."

"You . . . followed our trail?" Lan said, truly surprised for the first time that Rand could remember. "I must be getting careless."

"You left very little trace, but I can track as well as any man in the Two Rivers, except perhaps Tam al'Thor." She hesitated, then added, "Until my father died, he took me hunting with him, and taught me what he would have taught the sons he never had." She looked at Lan challengingly, but he only nodded with approval.

"If you can follow a trail I have tried to hide, he taught you well. Few can do that, even in the Borderlands."

Abruptly Nynaeve buried her face in her cup. Rand's eyes widened. She was blushing. Nynaeve never showed herself even the least bit disconcerted. Angry, yes; outraged, often; but never out of countenance. But she was certainly red-cheeked now, and trying to hide in the wine.

"Perhaps now," Moiraine said quietly, "you will answer a few of my questions. I have answered yours freely enough."

"With a great sackful of gleeman's tales," Nynaeve retorted. "The only *facts* I can see are that four young people have been carried off, for the Light alone knows what reason, by an Aes Sedai."

"You have been told that isn't known here," Lan said sharply. "You must learn to guard your tongue."

"Why should I?" Nynaeve demanded. "Why should I help hide you, or what you are? I've come to take Egwene and the boys back to Emond's Field, not help you spirit them away."

Thom broke in, in a scornful voice. "If you want them to see their village again—or you, either—you had better be more careful. There are those in Baerlon who would kill her"—he jerked his head toward Moiraine—"for what she is. Him, too." He indicated Lan, then abruptly moved forward to put his fists on the table. He loomed over Nynaeve, and his long mustaches and thick eyebrows suddenly seemed threatening.

Her eyes widened, and she started to lean back, away from him; then her back stiffened defiantly. Thom did not appear to notice; he went right on in an ominously soft voice. "They'd swarm over this inn like murderous ants on a rumor, a whisper. Their hate is that strong, their desire to kill or take any like these two. And the girl? The boys? You? You are all associated with them, enough for the Whitecloaks, anyway. You wouldn't like the way they ask questions, especially when the White Tower is involved. Whitecloak Questioners assume you're guilty before they start, and they have only one sentence for that kind of guilt. They don't care about finding the truth; they think they know that already. All they go after with their hot irons and pincers is a confession. Best you remember some secrets are too dangerous for saying aloud, even when you think you know who hears." He straightened with a muttered, "I seem to tell that to people often of late."

"Well put, gleeman," Lan said. The Warder had that weighing look in his eyes again. "I'm surprised to find you so concerned."

Thom shrugged. "It's known I arrived with you, too. I don't care for



the thought of a Questioner with a hot iron telling me to repent my sins and walk in the Light."

"That," Nynaeve put in sharply, "is just one more reason for them to come home with me in the morning. Or this afternoon, for that matter. The sooner we're away from you and on our way back to Emond's Field, the better."

"We can't," Rand said, and was glad that his friends all spoke up at the same time. That way Nynaeve's glare had to be spread around; she spared no one as it was. But he had spoken first, and they all fell silent, looking at him. Even Moiraine sat back in her chair, watching him over steeped fingers. It was an effort for him to meet the Wisdom's eyes. "If we go back to Emond's Field, the Trollocs will come back, too. They're . . . hunting us. I don't know why, but they are. Maybe we can find out why in Tar Valon. Maybe we can find out how to stop it. It's the only way."

Nynaeve threw up her hands. "You sound just like Tam. He had himself carried to the village meeting and tried to convince everybody. He'd already tried with the Village Council. The Light knows how your . . . Mistress Alys"—she invested the name with a wagonload of scorn—"managed to make him believe; he has a mite of sense, usually, more than most men. In any case, the Council is a pack of fools most of the time, but not foolish enough for that, and neither was anyone else. They agreed you had to be found. Then Tam wanted to be the one to come after you, and him not able to stand by himself. Foolishness must run in your family."

Mat cleared his throat, then mumbled, "What about my da? What did he say?"

"He's afraid you'll try your tricks with outlanders and get your head thumped. He seemed more afraid of that than of . . . Mistress Alys, here. But then, he was never much brighter than you."

Mat seemed unsure how to take what she had said, or how to reply, or even whether to reply.

"I expect," Perrin began hesitantly. "I mean, I suppose Master Luhhan was not too pleased about my leaving, either."

"Did you expect him to be?" Nynaeve shook her head disgustedly and looked at Egwene. "Maybe I should not be surprised at this harebrained idiocy from you three, but I thought others had more judgment."

Egwene sat back so she was shielded by Perrin. "I left a note," she said faintly. She tugged at the hood of her cloak as if she was afraid her unbound hair showed. "I explained everything." Nynaeve's face darkened.

Rand sighed. The Wisdom was on the point of one of her tongue-lashings, and it looked as if it might be a first-rate one. If she took a position in the heat of anger—if she said she intended to see them back in Emond's Field no matter what anybody said, for instance—she would be nearly impossible to budge. He opened his mouth.

"A note!" Nynaeve began, just as Moiraine said, "You and I must still talk, Wisdom."

If Rand could have stopped himself, he would have, but the words poured out as if it were a floodgate he had opened instead of his mouth. "All this is very well, but it doesn't change anything. We can't go back. We have to go on." He spoke more slowly toward the end, and his voice sank, so he finished in a whisper, with the Wisdom and the Aes Sedai both looking at him. It was the sort of look he received if he came on women talking Women's Circle business, the sort that said he had stepped in where he did not belong. He sat back, wishing he was somewhere else.

"Wisdom," Moiraine said, "you must believe that they are safer with me than they would be back in the Two Rivers."

"Safer!" Nynaeve tossed her head dismissively. "You are the one who brought them here, where the Whitecloaks are. The same Whitecloaks who, if the gleeman tells the truth, may harm them because of *you*. Tell me how they are safer, Aes Sedai."

"There are many dangers from which I cannot protect them," Moiraine agreed, "any more than you can protect them from being struck by lightning if they go home. But it is not lightning of which they must be afraid, nor even Whitecloaks. It is the Dark One, and minions of the Dark One. From those things I *can* protect. Touching the True Source, touching *saidar*, gives me that protection, as it does to every Aes Sedai." Nynaeve's mouth tightened skeptically. Moiraine's grew tighter, too, with anger, but she went on, her voice hard on the edge of patience. "Even those poor men who find themselves wielding the Power for a short time gain that much, though sometimes touching *saidin* protects, and sometimes the taint makes them more vulnerable. But I, or any Aes Sedai, can extend my protection to those close by me. No Fade can harm them as long as they are as close to me as they are right now. No Trolloc can come within a quarter of a mile without Lan knowing it, feeling the evil of it. Can you offer them half as much if they return to Emond's Field with you?"

"You stand up straw men," Nynaeve said. "We have a saying in the Two Rivers. 'Whether the bear beats the wolf or the wolf beats the bear, the rab-

bit always loses.' Take your contest somewhere else and leave Emond's Field folk out of it."

"Egwene," Moiraine said after a moment, "take the others and leave the Wisdom alone with me for a while." Her face was impassive; Nynaeve squared herself at the table as if getting ready for an all-in wrestling match.

Egwene bounced to her feet, her desire to be dignified obviously warring with her desire to avoid a confrontation with the Wisdom over her unbraided hair. She had no difficulty gathering up everyone by eye, though. Mat and Perrin scraped back their chairs hurriedly, making polite murmurs while trying not to actually run on their way out. Even Lan started for the door at a signal from Moiraine, drawing Thom with him.

Rand followed, and the Warder shut the door behind them, then took up guard across the hallway. Under Lan's eyes the others moved on down the hall a short distance; they were not to be allowed even the slightest chance of eavesdropping. When they had gone far enough to suit him, Lan leaned back against the wall. Even without his color-shifting cloak, he was so still that it would be easy not to notice him until you were right on him.

The gleeman muttered something about better things to do with his time and left with a stern, "Remember what I said," over his shoulder to the boys. No one else seemed inclined to leave.

"What did he mean?" Egwene asked absently, her eyes on the door that hid Moiraine and Nynaeve. She kept fiddling with her hair as if torn between continuing to hide the fact that it was no longer braided and pushing back the hood of her cloak.

"He gave us some advice," Mat said.

Perrin gave him a sharp look. "He said not to open our mouths until we were sure what we were going to say."

"That sounds like good advice," Egwene said, but clearly she was not really interested.

Rand was engrossed in his own thoughts. How could Nynaeve possibly be part of it? How could any of them be involved with Trollocs, and Fades, and Ba'alzamon appearing in their dreams? It was crazy. He wondered if Min had told Moiraine about Nynaeve. *What are they saying in there??*

He had no idea how long he had been standing there when the door finally opened. Nynaeve stepped out, and gave a start when she saw Lan. The Warder murmured something that made her toss her head angrily, then he slipped past her through the door.

She turned toward Rand, and for the first time he realized the others

had all quietly disappeared. He did not want to face the Wisdom alone, but he could not get away now that he had met Nynaeve's eye. *A particularly searching eye*, he thought, puzzled. *What did they say?* He drew himself up as she came closer.

She indicated Tam's sword. "That seems to fit you, now, though I would like it better if it did not. You've grown, Rand."

"In a week?" He laughed, but it sounded forced, and she shook her head as if he did not understand. "Did she convince you?" he asked. "It really is the only way." He paused, thinking of Min's sparks. "Are you coming with us?"

Nynaeve's eyes opened wide. "Coming with you! Why would I do that? Mavra Mallen came up from Deven Ride to see to things till I return, but she'll be wanting to get back as soon as she can. I still hope to make you see sense and come home with me."

"We can't." He thought he saw something move at the still-open door, but they were alone in the hallway.

"You told me that, and she did, too." Nynaeve frowned. "If *she* wasn't mixed up in it. . . . Aes Sedai are not to be trusted, Rand."

"You sound as if you really do believe us," he said slowly. "What happened at the village meeting?"

Nynaeve looked back at the doorway before answering; there was no movement there now. "It was a shambles, but there is no need for her to know we can't handle our affairs any better than that. And I believe only one thing: you are all in danger as long as you are with her."

"Something happened," he insisted. "Why do you want us to go back if you think there's even a chance we are right? And why you, at all? As soon send the Mayor himself as the Wisdom."

"You *have* grown." She smiled, and for a moment her amusement had him shifting his feet. "I can think of a time when you would not have questioned where I chose to go or what I chose to do, wherever or whatever it was. A time just a week ago."

He cleared his throat and pressed on stubbornly. "It doesn't make sense. Why are you really here?"

She half glanced at the still-empty doorway, then took his arm. "Let's walk while we talk." He let himself be led away, and when they were far enough from the door not to be overheard, she began again. "As I said, the meeting was a shambles. Everybody agreed someone had to be sent after you, but the village split into two groups. One wanted you rescued, though

there was considerable argument over how that was to be done considering that you were with a . . . the likes of *her*.”

He was glad she was remembering to watch what she said. “The others believed Tam?” he said.

“Not exactly, but they thought you shouldn’t be among strangers, either, especially not with someone like *her*. Either way, though, almost every man wanted to be one of the party. Tam, and Bran al’Vere, with the scales of office around his neck, and Haral Luhhan, till Alsbet made him sit down. Even Cenn Buie. The Light save me from men who think with the hair on their chests. Though I don’t know as there are any other kind.” She gave a hearty sniff, and looked up at him, an accusing glance. “At any rate, I could see it would be another day, perhaps more, before they came to any decision, and somehow . . . somehow I was sure we did not dare wait that long. So I called the Women’s Circle together and told them what had to be done. I cannot say they liked it, but they saw the right of it. And that is why I am here; because the men around Emond’s Field are stubborn wool-heads. They’re probably still arguing about who to send, though I left word I would take care of it.”

Nynaeve’s story explained her presence, but it did nothing to reassure him. She was still determined to bring them back with her.

“What did she say to you in there?” he asked. Moiraine would surely have covered every argument, but if there was one she had missed, he would make it.

“More of the same,” Nynaeve replied. “And she wanted to know about you boys. To see if she could reason out why you . . . have attracted the kind of attention you have . . . she *said*.” She paused, watching him out of the corner of her eye. “She tried to disguise it, but most of all she wanted to know if any of you was born outside the Two Rivers.”

His face was suddenly as taut as a drumhead. He managed a hoarse chuckle. “She does think of some odd things. I hope you assured her we’re all Emond’s Field born.”

“Of course,” she replied. There had only been a heartbeat’s pause before she spoke, so brief he would have missed it if he had not been watching for it.

He tried to think of something to say, but his tongue felt like a piece of leather. *She knows*. She was the Wisdom, after all, and the Wisdom was supposed to know everything about everyone. *If she knows, it was no fever-dream. Oh, Light help me, father!*

"Are you all right?" Nynaeve asked.

"He said . . . said I . . . wasn't his son. When he was delirious . . . with the fever. He said he found me. I thought it was just. . . ." His throat began to burn, and he had to stop.

"Oh, Rand." She stopped and took his face in both hands. She had to reach up to do it. "People say strange things in a fever. Twisted things. Things that are not true, or real. Listen to me. Tam al'Thor ran away seeking adventure when he was a boy no older than you. I can just remember when he came back to Emond's Field, a grown man with a red-haired, outlander wife and a babe in swaddling clothes. I remember Kari al'Thor cradling that child in her arms with as much love given and delight taken as I have ever seen from any woman with a babe. Her child, Rand. You. Now you straighten up and stop this foolishness."

"Of course," he said. *I was born outside the Two Rivers.* "Of course." Maybe Tam had been having a fever-dream, and maybe he had found a baby after a battle. "Why didn't you tell her?"

"It is none of any outlander's business."

"Were any of the others born outside?" As soon as the question was out, he shook his head. "No, don't answer. It's none of my business, either." But it would be nice to know if Moiraine had some special interest in him, over and above what she had in the whole lot of them. *Would it?*

"No, it isn't your business," Nynaeve agreed. "It might not mean anything. She could just be searching blindly for a reason, any reason, why those things are after you. After *all* of you."

Rand managed a grin. "Then you do believe they're chasing us."

Nynaeve shook her head wryly. "You've certainly learned how to twist words since you met her."

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

She studied him; he met her eyes steadily. "Today, I am going to have a bath. For the rest, we will have to see, won't we?"



# CHAPTER

## 17

---



### *Watchers and Hunters*

**A**fter the Wisdom left him, Rand made his way to the common room. He needed to hear people laughing, to forget what Nynaeve had said and the trouble she might cause alike.

The room was crowded indeed, but no one was laughing, though every chair and bench was filled and people lined the walls. Thom was performing again, standing on a table against the far wall, his gestures grand enough to fill the big room. It was *The Great Hunt of the Horn* again, but no one complained, of course. There were so many tales to be told about each of the Hunters, and so many Hunters to tell of, that no two tellings were ever the same. The whole of it in one telling would have taken a week or more. The only sound competing with the gleeman's voice and harp was the crackling of the fires in the fireplaces.

"... To the eight corners of the world, the Hunters ride, to the eight pillars of heaven, where the winds of time blow and fate seizes the mighty and the small alike by the forelock. Now, the greatest of the Hunters is Rogosh of Talmour, Rogosh Eagle-eye, famed at the court of the High King, feared on the slopes of Shayol Ghul. . . ." The Hunters were always mighty heroes, all of them.

Rand spotted his two friends and squeezed onto a place Perrin made for him on the end of their bench. Kitchen smells drifting into the room reminded him that he was hungry, but even the people who had food in

front of them gave it little attention. The maids who should have been serving stood entranced, clutching their aprons and looking at the gleeman, and nobody seemed to mind at all. Listening was better than eating, no matter how good the food.

“. . . since the day of her birth has the Dark One marked Blaes as his own, but not of this mind is she—no Darkfriend, Blaes of Matuchin! Strong as the ash she stands, lithe as the willow branch, beautiful as the rose. Golden-haired Blaes. Ready to die before she yields. But hark! Echoing from the towers of the city, trumpets blare, brazen and bold. Her heralds proclaim the arrival of a hero at her court. Drums thunder and cymbals sing! Rogosh Eagle-eye comes to do homage . . .”

“The Bargain of Rogosh Eagle-eye” wound its way to an end, but Thom paused only to wet his throat from a mug of ale before launching into “Lian’s Stand.” In turn that was followed by “The Fall of Aleth-Loriel,” and “Gaidal Cain’s Sword,” and “The Last Ride of Buad of Albhain.” The pauses grew longer as the evening wore on, and when Thom exchanged the harp for his flute, everyone knew it was the end of storytelling for the night. Two men joined Thom, with a drum and a hammered dulcimer, but sitting beside the table while he remained atop it.

The three young men from Emond’s Field began clapping their hands with the first note of “The Wind That Shakes the Willow,” and they were not the only ones. It was a favorite in the Two Rivers, and in Baerlon, too, it seemed. Here and there voices even took up the words, not so off-key as for anyone to hush them.

*“My love is gone, carried away  
by the wind that shakes the willow,  
and all the land is beaten hard  
by the wind that shakes the willow.  
But I will hold her close to me  
in heart and dearest memory,  
and with her strength to steel my soul,  
her love to warm my heart-strings,  
I will stand where we once sang,  
though cold wind shakes the willow.”*

The second song was not so sad. In fact, “Only One Bucket of Water” seemed even more merry than usual by comparison, which might have been the gleeman’s intent. People rushed to clear tables from the floor to



make room for dancing, and began kicking up their heels until the walls shook from the stomping and whirling. The first dance ended with laughing dancers leaving the floor holding their sides, and new people taking their places.

Thom played the opening notes of "Wild Geese on the Wing," then paused for people to take their places for the reel.

"I think I'll try a few steps," Rand said, getting to his feet. Perrin popped up right behind him. Mat was the last to move, and so found himself staying behind to guard the cloaks, along with Rand's sword and Perrin's axe.

"Remember I want a turn, too," Mat called after them.

The dancers formed two long lines facing each other, men in one, women in the other. First the drum and then the dulcimer took up the beat, and all the dancers began bending their knees in time. The girl across from Rand, her dark hair in braids that made him think of home, gave him a shy smile, and then a wink that was not shy at all. Thom's flute leaped into the tune, and Rand moved forward to meet the dark-haired girl; she threw back her head and laughed as he spun her around and passed her on to the next man in line.

Everyone in the room was laughing, he thought as he danced around his next partner, one of the serving maids with her apron flapping wildly. The only unsmiling face he saw was on a man huddled by one of the fireplaces, and that fellow had a scar that crossed his whole face from one temple to the opposite jaw, giving his nose a slant and drawing the corner of his mouth down. The man met his gaze and grimaced, and Rand looked away in embarrassment. Maybe with that scar the fellow could not smile.

He caught his next partner as she spun, and whirled her in a circle before passing her on. Three more women danced with him as the music gained speed, then he was back with the first dark-haired girl for a fast promenade that changed the lines about completely. She was still laughing, and she gave him another wink.

The scar-faced man was scowling at him. His step faltered and his cheeks grew hot. He had not meant to embarrass the fellow; he really did not think he had stared. He turned to meet his next partner and forgot all about the man. The next woman to dance into his arms was Nynaeve.

He stumbled through the steps, almost tripping over his own feet, nearly stepping on hers. She danced gracefully enough to make up for his clumsiness, smiling the while.

"I thought you were a better dancer," she laughed as they changed partners.

He had only a moment to gather himself before they changed again, and he found himself dancing with Moiraine. If he had thought he was stumble-footed with the Wisdom, it was nothing to how he felt with the Aes Sedai. She glided across the floor smoothly, her gown swirling about her; he almost fell twice. She gave him a sympathetic smile, which made it worse rather than helping. It was a relief to go to his next partner in the pattern, even if it was Egwene.

He regained some of his poise. After all, he had danced with her for years. Her hair still hung unbraided, but she had gathered it back with a red ribbon. *Probably couldn't decide whether to please Moiraine or Nynaeve*, he thought sourly. Her lips were parted, and she looked as if she wanted to say something, but she never spoke, and he was not about to speak first. Not after the way she had cut off his earlier attempt in the private dining room. They stared at one another soberly and danced apart without a word.

He was glad enough to return to the bench when the reel was done. The music for another dance, a jig, began while he was sitting down. Mat hurried to join in, and Perrin slid onto the bench as he was leaving.

"Did you see her?" Perrin began before he was even seated. "Did you?"

"Which one?" Rand asked. "The Wisdom, or Mistress Alys? I danced with both of them."

"The Ae . . . Mistress Alys, too?" Perrin exclaimed. "I danced with Nynaeve. I didn't even know she danced. She never does at any of the dances back home."

"I wonder," Rand said thoughtfully, "what the Women's Circle would say about the Wisdom dancing? Maybe that's why."

Then the music and the clapping and the singing were too loud for any further talk. Rand and Perrin joined in the clapping as the dancers circled the floor. Several times he became aware of the scar-faced man staring at him. The man had a right to be touchy, with that scar, but Rand did not see anything he could do now that would not make matters worse. He concentrated on the music and avoided looking at the fellow.

The dancing and singing went on into the night. The maids finally did remember their duties; Rand was glad to wolf down some hot stew and bread. Everyone ate where they sat or stood. Rand joined in three more dances, and he managed his steps better when he found himself dancing with Nynaeve again, and with Moiraine, as well. This time they both complimented him on his dancing, which made him stammer. He danced with Egwene again, too; she stared at him, dark-eyed and always seeming on the point of speaking, but never saying a word. He was just as silent as she, but

he was sure he did not scowl at her, no matter what Mat said when he returned to the bench.

Toward midnight Moiraine left. Egwene, after one harried look from the Aes Sedai to Nynaeve, hurried after her. The Wisdom watched them with an unreadable expression, then deliberately joined in another dance before she left, too, with a look as if she had gained a point on the Aes Sedai.

Soon Thom was putting his flute into its case and arguing good-naturedly with those who wanted him to stay longer. Lan came by to gather up Rand and the others.

"We have to make an early start," the Warder said, leaning close to be heard over the noise, "and we will need all the rest we can get."

"There's a fellow been staring at me," Mat said. "A man with a scar across his face. You don't think he could be a . . . one of the *friends* you warned us about?"

"Like this?" Rand said, drawing a finger across his nose to the corner of his mouth. "He stared at me, too." He looked around the room. People were drifting away, and most of those still left clustered around Thom. "He's not here, now."

"I saw the man," Lan said. "According to Master Fitch, he's a spy for the Whitecloaks. He's no worry to us." Maybe he was not, but Rand could see something was bothering the Warder.

Rand glanced at Mat, who had the stiff expression on his face that always meant he was hiding something. *A Whitecloak spy. Could Bornhald want to get back at us that much?* "We're leaving early?" he said. "Really early?" Maybe they could be gone before anything came of it.

"At first light," the Warder replied.

As they left the common room, Mat singing snatches of song under his breath, and Perrin stopping now and again to try out a new step he had learned, Thom joined them in high spirits. Lan's face was expressionless as they headed for the stairs.

"Where is Nynaeve sleeping?" Mat asked. "Master Fitch said we got the last rooms."

"She has a bed," Thom said dryly, "in with Mistress Alys and the girl."

Perrin whistled between his teeth, and Mat muttered, "Blood and ashes! I wouldn't be in Egwene's shoes for all the gold in Caemlyn!"

Not for the first time, Rand wished Mat could think seriously about something for more than two minutes. Their own shoes were not very comfortable right then. "I'm going to get some milk," he said. Maybe it would help him sleep. *Maybe I won't dream tonight.*

Lan looked at him sharply. "There's something wrong tonight. Don't wander far. And remember, we leave whether you are awake enough to sit your saddle or have to be tied on."

The Warder started up the stairs; the others followed him, their jollity subdued. Rand stood in the hall alone. After having so many people around, it was lonely indeed.

He hurried to the kitchen, where a scullery maid was still on duty. She poured a mug of milk from a big stone crock for him.

As he came out of the kitchen, drinking, a shape in dull black started toward him down the length of the hall, raising pale hands to toss back the dark cowl that had hidden the face beneath. The cloak hung motionless as the figure moved, and the face. . . . A man's face, but pasty white, like a slug under a rock, and eyeless. From oily black hair to puffy cheeks was as smooth as an eggshell. Rand choked, spraying milk.

"You are one of them, boy," the Fade said, a hoarse whisper like a file softly drawn across bone.

Dropping the mug, Rand backed away. He wanted to run, but it was all he could do to make his feet take one halting step at a time. He could not break free of that eyeless face; his gaze was held, and his stomach curdled. He tried to shout for help, to scream; his throat was like stone. Every ragged breath hurt.

The Fade glided closer, in no hurry. Its strides had a sinuous, deadly grace, like a viper, the resemblance emphasized by the overlapping black plates of armor down its chest. Thin, bloodless lips curved in a cruel smile, made more mocking by the smooth, pale skin where eyes should have been. The voice made Bornhald's seem warm and soft. "Where are the others? I know they are here. Speak, boy, and I will let you live."

Rand's back struck wood, a wall or a door—he could not make himself look around to see which. Now that his feet had stopped, he could not make them start again. He shivered, watching the Myrddraal slither nearer. His shaking grew harder with every slow stride.

"Speak, I say, or—"

From above came a quick clatter of boots, from the stairs up the hall, and the Myrddraal cut off, whirling. The cloak hung still. For an instant the Fade's head tilted, as if that eyeless gaze could pierce the wooden wall. A sword appeared in a dead-white hand, blade as black as the cloak. The light in the hall seemed to grow dimmer in the presence of that blade. The pounding of boots grew louder, and the Fade spun back to Rand, an al-

most boneless movement. The black blade rose; narrow lips peeled back in a rictus snarl.

Trembling, Rand knew he was going to die. Midnight steel flashed at his head . . . and stopped.

"You belong to the Great Lord of the Dark." The breathy grating of that voice sounded like fingernails scratched across a slate. "You are his."

Spinning in a black blur, the Fade darted down the hall away from Rand. The shadows at the end of the hall reached out and embraced it, and it was gone.

Lan leaped down the last stairs, landing with a crash, sword in hand.

Rand struggled to find his voice. "Fade," he gasped. "It was. . . ." Abruptly he remembered his sword. With the Myrddraal facing him he had never thought of it. He fumbled the heron-mark blade out now, not caring if it was too late. "It ran that way!"

Lan nodded absently; he seemed to be listening to something else. "Yes. It's going; fading. No time to pursue it, now. We're leaving, shepherdder."

More boots stumbled down the stairs; Mat and Perrin and Thom, hung about with blankets and saddlebags. Mat was still buckling his bedroll, with his bow awkward under his arm.

"Leaving?" Rand said. Sheathing his sword, he took his things from Thom. "Now? In the night?"

"You want to wait for the Halfman to come back, shepherdder?" the Warder said impatiently. "For half a dozen of them? It knows where we are, now."

"I will ride with you again," Thom told the Warder, "if you have no great objections. Too many people remember that I arrived with you. I fear that before tomorrow this will be a bad place to be known as your friend."

"You can ride with us, or ride to Shayol Ghul, gleeman." Lan's scabbard rattled from the force with which he rammed his sword home.

A stableman came darting past them from the rear door, and then Moiraine appeared with Master Fitch, and behind them Egwene, with her bundled shawl in her arms. And Nynaeve. Egwene looked frightened almost to tears, but the Wisdom's face was a mask of cool anger.

"You must take this seriously," Moiraine was telling the innkeeper. "You will certainly have trouble here by morning. Darkfriends, perhaps; perhaps worse. When it comes, quickly make it clear that we are gone. Offer no resistance. Just let whoever it is know that we left in the night, and they should bother you no further. It is us they are after."

"Never you worry about trouble," Master Fitch replied jovially. "Never a bit. If any come around my inn trying to make trouble for my guests . . . well, they'll get short shrift from the lads and I. Short shrift. And they'll hear not a word about where you've gone or when, or even if you were ever here. I've no use for that kind. Not a word will be spoken about you by any here. Not a word!"

"But—"

"Mistress Alys, I really must see to your horses if you're going to leave in good order." He pulled loose from her grip on his sleeve and trotted in the direction of the stables.

Moiraine sighed vexedly. "Stubborn, stubborn man. He will not listen."

"You think Trollocs might come here hunting for us?" Mat asked.

"Trollocs!" Moiraine snapped. "Of course not! There are other things to fear, not the least of which is how we were found." Ignoring Mat's bristle, she went right on. "The Fade cannot believe we will remain here, now that we know it has found us, but Master Fitch takes Darkfriends too lightly. He thinks of them as wretches hiding in the shadows, but Darkfriends can be found in the shops and streets of every city, and in the highest councils, too. The Myrddraal may send them to see if he can learn of our plans." She turned on her heel and left, Lan close behind her.

As they started for the stableyard, Rand fell in beside Nynaeve. She had her saddlebags and blankets, too. "So you're coming after all," he said. *Min was right.*

"*Was* there something down here?" she asked quietly. "*She* said it was—" She stopped abruptly and looked at him.

"A Fade," he answered. He was amazed that he could say it so calmly. "It was in the hall with me, and then Lan came."

Nynaeve shrugged her cloak against the wind as they left the inn. "Perhaps there is something after you. But I came to see you safely back in Emond's Field, all of you, and I will not leave till that is done. I won't leave you alone with *her* sort." Lights moved in the stables where the ostlers were saddling the horses.

"Mutch!" the innkeeper shouted from the stable door where he stood with Moiraine. "Stir your bones!" He turned back to her, appearing to attempt to soothe her rather than really listening when she spoke, though he did it deferentially, with bows interspersed among the orders called to the stablemen.

The horses were led out, the stablemen grumbling softly about the hurry and the lateness. Rand held Egwene's bundle, handing it up to her

when she was on Bela's back. She looked back at him with wide, fear-filled eyes. *At least she doesn't think it's an adventure anymore.*

He was ashamed as soon as he thought it. She was in danger because of him and the others. Even riding back to Emond's Field alone would be safer than going on. "Egwene, I . . ."

The words died in his mouth. She was too stubborn to just turn back, not after saying she was going all the way to Tar Valon. *What about what Min saw? She's part of it. Light, part of what?*

"Egwene," he said, "I'm sorry. I can't seem to think straight anymore."

She leaned down to grip his hand hard. In the light from the stable he could see her face clearly. She did not look as frightened as she had.

Once they were all mounted, Master Fitch insisted on leading them to the gates, the stablemen lighting the way with their lamps. The round-bellied innkeeper bowed them on their way with assurances that he would keep their secrets, and invitations to come again. Mutch watched them leave as sourly as he had watched them arrive.

There was one, Rand thought, who would not give short shrift to anyone, or any kind of shrift. Mutch would tell the first person who asked him when they had gone and everything else he could think of concerning them. A little distance down the street, he looked back. One figure stood, lamp raised high, peering after them. He did not need to see the face to know it was Mutch.

The streets of Baerlon were abandoned at that hour of the night; only a few faint glimmers here and there escaped tightly closed shutters, and the light of the moon in its last quarter waxed and waned with the wind-driven clouds. Now and again a dog barked as they passed an alleyway, but no other sound disturbed the night except their horses' hooves and the wind whistling across the rooftops. The riders held an even deeper silence, huddled in their cloaks and their own thoughts.

The Warder led the way, as usual, with Moiraine and Egwene close behind. Nynaeve kept near the girl, and the others brought up the rear in a tight cluster. Lan kept the horses moving at a brisk walk.

Rand watched the streets around them warily, and he noticed his friends doing the same. Shifting moon shadows recalled the shadows at the end of the hall, the way they had seemed to reach out to the Fade. An occasional noise in the distance, like a barrel toppling, or another dog barking, jerked every head around. Slowly, bit by bit as they made their way through the town, they all bunched their horses closer to Lan's black stallion and Moiraine's white mare.



At the Caemlyn Gate Lan dismounted and hammered with his fist on the door of a small square stone building squatting against the wall. A weary Watchman appeared, rubbing sleepily at his face. As Lan spoke, his sleepiness vanished, and he stared past the Warder to the others.

"You want to leave?" he exclaimed. "Now? In the night? You must be mad!"

"Unless there is some order from the Governor that prohibits our leaving," Moiraine said. She had dismounted as well, but she stayed back from the door, out of the light that spilled into the dark street.

"Not exactly, mistress." The Watchman peered at her, frowning as he tried to make out her face. "But the gates stay shut from sundown to sunup. No one to come in except in daylight. That's the order. Anyway, there're wolves out there. Killed a dozen cows in the last week. Could kill a man just as easy."

"No one to come in, but nothing about leaving," Moiraine said as if that settled the matter. "You see? We are not asking you to disobey the Governor."

Lan pressed something into the Watchman's hand. "For your trouble," he murmured.

"I suppose," the Watchman said slowly. He glanced at his hand; gold glinted before he hastily stuffed it in his pocket. "I suppose leaving wasn't mentioned at that. Just a minute." He stuck his head back inside. "Arin! Dar! Get out here and help me open the gate. There's people want to leave. Don't argue. Just do it."

Two more of the Watch appeared from inside, stopping to stare in sleepy surprise at the party of eight waiting to leave. Under the first Watchman's urgings they shuffled over to heave at the big wheel that raised the thick bar across the gates, then turned their efforts to cranking the gates open. The crank-and-ratchet made a rapid clicking sound, but the well-oiled gates swung outward silently. Before they were even a quarter open, though, a cold voice spoke out of the darkness.

"What is this? Are these gates not ordered closed until sunrise?"

Five white-cloaked men walked into the light from the guardhouse door. Their cowls were drawn up to hide their faces, but each man rested his hand on his sword, and the golden suns on their left breasts were a plain announcement of who they were. Mat muttered under his breath. The Watchmen stopped their cranking and exchanged uneasy looks.

"This is none of your affair," the first Watchman said belligerently.



Five white hoods turned to regard him, and he finished in a weaker tone. "The Children hold no sway here. The Governor—"

"The Children of the Light," the white-cloaked man who had first spoken said softly, "hold sway wherever men walk in the Light. Only where the Shadow of the Dark One reigns are the Children denied, yes?" He swung his hood from the Watchman to Lan, then suddenly gave the Warder a second, more wary, look.

The Warder had not moved; in fact, he seemed completely at ease. But not many people could look at the Children so uncaringly. Lan's stony face could as well have been looking at a bootblack. When the Whitecloak spoke again, he sounded suspicious.

"What kind of people want to leave town walls in the night during times like these? With wolves stalking the darkness, and the Dark One's handiwork seen flying over the town?" He eyed the braided leather band that crossed Lan's forehead and held his long hair back. "A northerner, yes?"

Rand hunched lower in his saddle. A Draghkar. It had to be that, unless the man just named anything he did not understand as the Dark One's handiwork. With a Fade at the Stag and Lion, he should have expected a Draghkar, but at the moment he was hardly thinking about it. He thought he recognized the Whitecloak's voice.

"Travelers," Lan replied calmly. "Of no interest to you or yours."

"Everyone is of interest to the Children of the Light."

Lan shook his head slightly. "Are you really after more trouble with the Governor? He has limited your numbers in the town, even had you followed. What will he do when he discovers you're harassing honest citizens at his gates?" He turned to the Watchmen. "Why have you stopped?" They hesitated, put their hands back on the crank, then hesitated again when the Whitecloak spoke.

"The Governor does not know what happens under his nose. There is evil he does not see, or smell. But the Children of the Light see." The Watchmen looked at one another; their hands opened and closed as if regretting the spears left inside the guardhouse. "The Children of the Light smell the evil." The Whitecloak's eyes turned to the people on horseback. "We smell it, and root it out. Wherever it is found."

Rand tried to make himself even smaller, but the movement drew the man's attention.

"What have we here? Someone who does not wish to be seen? What do

you—? Ah!” The man brushed back the hood of his white cloak, and Rand was looking at the face he had known would be there. Bornhald nodded with obvious satisfaction. “Clearly, Watchman, I have saved you from a great disaster. These are Darkfriends you were about to help escape from the Light. You should be reported to your Governor for discipline, or perhaps given to the Questioners to discover your true intent this night.” He paused, eyeing the Watchman’s fear; it seemed to have no effect on him. “You would not wish that, no? Instead, I will take these ruffians to our camp, that they may be questioned in the Light—instead of you, yes?”

“You will take me to your camp, Whitecloak?” Moiraine’s voice came suddenly from every direction at once. She had moved back into the night at the Children’s approach, and shadows clumped around her. “You will question me?” Darkness wreathed her as she took a step forward; it made her seem taller. “You will bar my way?”

Another step, and Rand gasped. She *was* taller, her head level with his where he sat on the gray’s back. Shadows clung about her face like thunderclouds.

“Aes Sedai!” Bornhald shouted, and five swords flashed from their sheaths. “Die!” The other four hesitated, but he slashed at her in the same motion that cleared his sword.

Rand cried out as Moiraine’s staff rose to intercept the blade. That delicately carved wood could not possibly stop hard-swung steel. Sword met staff, and sparks sprayed in a fountain, a hissing roar hurling Bornhald back into his white-cloaked companions. All five went down in a heap. Tendrils of smoke rose from Bornhald’s sword, on the ground beside him, blade bent at a right angle where it had been melted almost in two.

“You dare attack me!” Moiraine’s voice roared like a whirlwind. Shadow spun in on her, draped her like a hooded cloak; she loomed as high as the town wall. Her eyes glared down, a giant staring at insects.

“Go!” Lan shouted. In one lightning move he snatched the reins of Moiraine’s mare and leaped into his own saddle. “Now!” he commanded. His shoulders brushed either gate as his stallion tore through the narrow opening like a flung stone.

For a moment Rand remained frozen, staring. Moiraine’s head and shoulders stood above the wall, now. Watchmen and Children alike cowered away from her, huddling with their backs against the front of the guardhouse. The Aes Sedai’s face was lost in the night, but her eyes, as big as full moons, shone with impatience as well as anger when they touched

him. Swallowing hard, he booted Cloud in the ribs and galloped after the others.

Fifty paces from the wall, Lan drew them up, and Rand looked back. Moiraine's shadowed shape towered high over the log palisade, head and shoulders a deeper darkness against the night sky, surrounded by a silver nimbus from the hidden moon. As he watched, mouth hanging open, the Aes Sedai stepped over the wall. The gates began swinging shut frantically. As soon as her feet were on the ground outside, she was suddenly her normal size again.

"Hold the gates!" an unsteady voice shouted inside the wall. Rand thought it was Bornhald. "We must pursue them, and take them!" But the Watchmen did not slow the pace of closing. The gates slammed shut, and moments later the bar crashed into place, sealing them. *Maybe some of those other Whitecloaks aren't as eager to confront an Aes Sedai as Bornhald.*

Moiraine hurried to Aldieb, stroking the white mare's nose once before she tucked her staff under the girth strap. Rand did not need to look this time to know there was not even a nick in the staff.

"You were taller than a giant," Egwene said breathlessly, shifting on Bela's back. No one else spoke, though Mat and Perrin edged their horses away from the Aes Sedai.

"Was I?" Moiraine said absently as she swung into her saddle.

"I saw you," Egwene protested.

"The mind plays tricks in the night; the eye sees what is not there."

"This is no time for games," Nynaeve began angrily, but Moiraine cut her off.

"No time for games indeed. What we gained at the Stag and Lion we may have lost here." She looked back at the gate and shook her head. "If only I could believe the Draghkar was on the ground." With a self-deprecatory sniff she added, "Or if only the Myrddraal were truly blind. If I am wishing, I might as well wish for the truly impossible. No matter. They know the way we must go, but with luck we will stay a step ahead of them. Lan!"

The Warder moved off eastward down the Caemlyn Road, and the rest followed close behind, hooves thudding rhythmically on the hard-packed earth.

They kept to an easy pace, a fast walk the horses could maintain for hours without any Aes Sedai help. Before they had been even one hour on their way, though, Mat cried out, pointing back the way they had come.

"Look there!"

They all drew rein and stared.

Flames lit the night over Baerlon as if someone had built a house-size bonfire, tinting the undersides of the cloud with red. Sparks whipped into the sky on the wind.

"I warned him," Moiraine said, "but he would not take it seriously." Aldieb danced sideways, an echo of the Aes Sedai's frustration. "He would not take it seriously."

"The inn?" Perrin said. "That's the Stag and Lion? How can you be sure?"

"How far do you want to stretch coincidence?" Thom asked. "It could be the Governor's house, but it isn't. And it isn't a warehouse, or somebody's kitchen stove, or your grandmother's haystack."

"Perhaps the Light shines on us a little this night," Lan said, and Egwene rounded on him angrily.

"How can you say that? Poor Master Fitch's inn is burning! People may be hurt!"

"If they have attacked the inn," Moiraine said, "perhaps our exit from the town and my . . . display went unnoticed."

"Unless that's what the Myrddraal wants us to think," Lan added.

Moiraine nodded in the darkness. "Perhaps. In any case, we must press on. There will be little rest for anyone tonight."

"You say that so easily, Moiraine," Nynaeve exclaimed. "What about the people at the inn? People must be hurt, and the innkeeper has lost his livelihood, because of you! For all your talk about walking in the Light you're ready to go on without sparing a thought for him. His trouble is because of you!"

"Because of those three," Lan said angrily. "The fire, the injured, the going on—all because of those three. The fact that the price must be paid is proof that it is worth paying. The Dark One wants those boys of yours, and anything he wants this badly, he must be kept from. Or would you rather let the Fade have them?"

"Be at ease, Lan," Moiraine said. "Be at ease. Wisdom, you think I can help Master Fitch and the people at the inn? Well, you are right." Nynaeve started to say something, but Moiraine waved it away and went on. "I can go back by myself and give some help. Not too much, of course. That would draw attention to those I helped, attention they would not thank me for, especially with the Children of the Light in the town. And that would leave only Lan to protect the rest of you. He is very good, but it will take more than him if a Myrddraal and a fist of Trollocs find you. Of course, we

could all return, though I doubt I can get all of us back into Baerlon unnoticed. And that would expose all of you to whomever set that fire, not to mention the Whitecloaks. Which alternative would you choose, Wisdom, if you were I?"

"I would do something," Nynaeve muttered unwillingly.

"And in all probability hand the Dark One his victory," Moiraine replied. "Remember what—who—it is that he wants. We are in a war, as surely as anyone in Ghealdan, though thousands fight there and only eight of us here. I will have gold sent to Master Fitch, enough to rebuild the Stag and Lion, gold that cannot be traced to Tar Valon. And help for any who were hurt, as well. Any more than that will only endanger them. It is far from simple, you see. Lan." The Warder turned his horse and took up the road again.

From time to time Rand looked back. Eventually all he could see was the glow on the clouds, and then even that was lost in the darkness. He hoped Min was all right.

All was still pitch-dark when the Warder finally led them off the packed dirt of the road and dismounted. Rand estimated there were no more than a couple of hours till dawn. They hobbled the horses, still saddled, and made a cold camp.

"One hour," Lan warned as everyone except him was wrapping up in their blankets. He would stand guard while they slept. "One hour, and we must be on our way." Silence settled over them.

After a few minutes Mat spoke in a whisper that barely reached Rand. "I wonder what Dav did with that badger." Rand shook his head silently, and Mat hesitated. Finally he said, "I thought we were safe, you know, Rand. Not a sign of anything since we crossed the Taren, and there we were in a city, with walls around us. I thought we were safe. And then that dream. And a Fade. Are we ever going to be safe again?"

"Not until we get to Tar Valon," Rand said. "That's what she told us."

"Will we be safe then?" Perrin asked softly, and all three of them looked to the shadowy mound that was the Aes Sedai. Lan had melded into the darkness; he could have been anywhere.

Rand yawned suddenly. The others twitched nervously at the sound. "I think we'd better get some sleep," he said. "Staying awake won't answer anything."

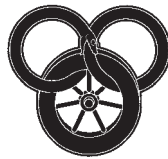
Perrin spoke quietly. "She should have done something."

No one answered.

Rand squirmed onto his side to avoid a root, tried his back, then rolled

off of a stone onto his belly and another root. It was not a good campsite they had stopped at, not like the spots the Warder had chosen on the way north from the Taren. He fell asleep wondering if the roots digging into his ribs would make him dream, and woke at Lan's touch on his shoulder, ribs aching, and grateful that if any dreams had come he did not remember them.

It was still the dark just before dawn, but once the blankets were rolled and strapped behind their saddles Lan had them riding east again. As the sun rose they made a bleary-eyed breakfast on bread and cheese and water, eating while they rode, huddled in their cloaks against the wind. All except Lan, that is. He ate, but he was not bleary-eyed, and he did not huddle. He had changed back into his shifting cloak, and it whipped around him, fluttering through grays and greens, and the only mind he paid it was to keep it clear of his sword-arm. His face remained without expression, but his eyes searched constantly, as if he expected an ambush any moment.



# CHAPTER

## 18

---



### *The Caemlyn Road*

**T**he Caemlyn Road was not very different from the North Road through the Two Rivers. It was considerably wider, of course, and showed the wear of much more use, but it was still hard-packed dirt, lined on either side by trees that would not have been at all out of place in the Two Rivers, especially since only the evergreens carried a leaf.

The land itself was different, though, for by midday the road entered low hills. For two days the road ran through the hills—cut right through them, sometimes, if they were wide enough to have made the road go much out of its way and not so big as to have made digging through too difficult. As the angle of the sun shifted each day it became apparent that the road, for all it appeared straight to the eye, curved slowly southward as it ran east. Rand had daydreamed over Master al’Vere’s old map—half the boys in Emond’s Field had daydreamed over it—and as he remembered, the road curved around something called the Hills of Absher until it reached Whitebridge.

From time to time Lan had them dismount atop one of the hills, where he could get a good view of the road both ahead and behind, and the surrounding countryside as well. The Warder would study the view while the others stretched their legs or sat under the trees and ate.

“I used to like cheese,” Egwene said on the third day after leaving Baerlon. She sat with her back to the bole of a tree, grimacing over a dinner

that was once again the same as breakfast, as supper would be. "Not a chance of tea. Nice hot tea." She pulled her cloak tighter and shifted around the tree in a vain effort to avoid the swirling wind.

"Flatwort tea and andilay root," Nynaeve was saying to Moiraine, "are best for fatigue. They clear the head and dim the burn in tired muscles."

"I am sure they do," the Aes Sedai murmured, giving Nynaeve a side-long glance.

Nynaeve's jaw tightened, but she continued in the same tone. "Now, if you must go without sleep. . . ."

"No tea!" Lan said sharply to Egwene. "No fire! We can't see them yet, but they are back there, somewhere, a Fade or two and their Trollocs, and they know we are taking this road. No need to tell them exactly where we are."

"I wasn't asking," Egwene muttered into her cloak. "Just regretting."

"If they know we're on the road," Perrin asked, "why don't we go straight across to Whitebridge?"

"Even Lan cannot travel as fast cross-country as by road," Moiraine said, interrupting Nynaeve, "especially not through the Hills of Absher." The Wisdom gave an exasperated sigh. Rand wondered what she was up to; after ignoring the Aes Sedai completely for the first day, Nynaeve had spent the last two trying to talk to her about herbs. Moiraine moved away from the Wisdom as she went on. "Why do you think the road curves to avoid them? And we would have to come back to this road eventually. We might find them ahead of us instead of following."

Rand looked doubtful, and Mat muttered something about "the long way round."

"Have you seen a farm this morning?" Lan asked. "Or even the smoke from a chimney? You haven't, because it's all wilderness from Baerlon to Whitebridge, and Whitebridge is where we must cross the Arinelle. That is the only bridge spanning the Arinelle south of Maradon, in Saldaea."

Thom snorted and blew out his mustaches. "What is to stop them from having someone, something, at Whitebridge already?"

From the west came the keening wail of a horn. Lan's head whipped around to stare back down the road behind them. Rand felt a chill. A part of him remained calm enough to think, ten miles, no more.

"Nothing stops them, gleeman," the Warder said. "We trust to the Light and luck. But now we know for certain there are Trollocs behind us."

Moiraine dusted her hands. "It is time for us to move on." The Aes Sedai mounted her white mare.



That set off a scramble for the horses, speeded by a second winding of the horn. This time others answered, the thin sounds floating out of the west like a dirge. Rand made ready to put Cloud to a gallop right away, and everyone else settled their reins with the same urgency. Everyone except Lan and Moiraine. The Warder and the Aes Sedai exchanged a long look.

"Keep them moving, Moiraine Sedai," Lan said finally. "I will return as soon as I am able. You will know if I fail." Putting a hand on Mandarb's saddle, he vaulted to the back of the black stallion and galloped down the hill. Heading west. The horns sounded again.

"The Light go with you, last Lord of the Seven Towers," Moiraine said almost too softly for Rand to hear. Drawing a deep breath, she turned Aldieb to the east. "We must go on," she said, and started off at a slow, steady trot. The others followed her in a tight file.

Rand twisted once in his saddle to look for Lan, but the Warder was already lost to sight among the low hills and leafless trees. Last Lord of the Seven Towers, she had called him. He wondered what that meant. He had not thought anyone besides himself had heard, but Thom was chewing the ends of his mustaches, and he had a speculative frown on his face. The gleeman seemed to know a great many things.

The horns called and answered once more behind them. Rand shifted in his saddle. They were closer this time; he was sure of it. Eight miles. Maybe seven. Mat and Egwene looked over their shoulders, and Perrin hunched as if he expected something to hit him in the back. Nynaeve rode up to speak to Moiraine.

"Can't we go any faster?" she asked. "Those horns are getting closer."

The Aes Sedai shook her head. "And why do they let us know they are there? Perhaps so we will hurry on without thinking of what might be ahead."

They kept on at the same steady pace. At intervals the horns gave cry behind them, and each time the sound was closer. Rand tried to stop thinking of how close, but the thought came unbidden at every brazen wail. Five miles, he was thinking anxiously, when Lan suddenly burst around the hill behind them at a gallop.

He came abreast of Moiraine, reining in the stallion. "At least three fists of Trollocs, each led by a Halfman. Maybe five."

"If you were close enough to see them," Egwene said worriedly, "they could have seen you. They could be right on your heels."

"He was not seen." Nynaeve drew herself up as everyone looked at her. "I have followed his trail, remember."

"Hush," Moiraine commanded. "Lan is telling us there are perhaps five

hundred Trollocs behind us." A stunned silence followed, then Lan spoke again.

"And they are closing the gap. They will be on us in an hour or less."

Half to herself, the Aes Sedai said, "If they had that many before, why were they not used at Emond's Field? If they did not, how did they come here since?"

"They are spread out to drive us before them," Lan said, "with scouts quartering ahead of the main parties."

"Driving us toward what?" Moiraine mused. As if to answer her a horn sounded in the distance to the west, a long moan that was answered this time by others, all ahead of them. Moiraine stopped Aldieb; the others followed her lead, Thom and the Emond's Field folk looking around fearfully. Horns cried out before them, and behind. Rand thought they held a note of triumph.

"What do we do now?" Nynaeve demanded angrily. "Where do we go?"

"All that is left is north or south," Moiraine said, more thinking aloud than answering the Wisdom. "To the south are the Hills of Absher, barren and dead, and the Taren, with no way to cross, and no traffic by boat. To the north, we can reach the Arinelle before nightfall, and there will be a chance of a trader's boat. If the ice has broken at Maradon."

"There is a place the Trollocs will not go," Lan said, but Moiraine's head whipped around sharply.

"No!" She motioned to the Warder, and he put his head close to hers so their talk could not be overheard.

The horns winded, and Rand's horse danced nervously.

"They're trying to frighten us," Thom growled, attempting to steady his mount. He sounded half angry and half as if the Trollocs were succeeding. "They're trying to scare us until we panic and run. They'll have us, then."

Egwene's head swung with every blast of a horn, staring first ahead of them, then behind, as if looking for the first Trollocs. Rand wanted to do the same thing, but he tried to hide it. He moved Cloud closer to her.

"We go north," Moiraine announced.

The horns keened shrilly as they left the road and trotted into the surrounding hills.

The hills were low, but the way was all up and down, with never a flat stretch, beneath bare-branched trees and through dead undergrowth. The horses climbed laboriously up one slope only to canter down the other. Lan set a hard pace, faster than they had used on the road.

Branches lashed Rand across the face and chest. Old creepers and vines

caught his arms, and sometimes snagged his foot right out of the stirrup. The keening horns came ever closer, and ever more frequently.

As hard as Lan pushed them, they were not getting farther on very quickly. They traveled two feet up or down for every one forward, and every foot was a scrambling effort. And the horns were coming nearer. *Two miles*, he thought. *Maybe less.*

After a time Lan began peering first one way then another, the hard planes of his face as close to worry as Rand had seen them. Once the Warder stood in his stirrups to stare back the way they had come. All Rand could see were trees. Lan settled back into his saddle and unconsciously pushed back his cloak to clear his sword as he resumed searching the forest.

Rand met Mat's eye questioningly, but Mat only grimaced at the Warder's back and shrugged helplessly.

Lan spoke, then, over his shoulder. "There are Trollocs nearby." They topped a hill and started down the other side. "Some of the scouts, sent ahead of the rest. Probably. If we come on them, stay with me at all costs, and do as I do. We must keep on the way we are going."

"Blood and ashes!" Thom muttered. Nynaeve motioned to Egwene to keep close.

Scattered stands of evergreens provided the only real cover, but Rand tried to peer in every direction at once, his imagination turning gray tree trunks caught out of the corner of his eye into Trollocs. The horns were closer, too. And directly behind them. He was sure of it. Behind and coming closer.

They topped another hill.

Below them, just starting up the slope, marched Trollocs carrying poles tipped with great loops of rope or long hooks. Many Trollocs. The line stretched far to either side, the ends out of sight, but at its center, directly in front of Lan, a Fade rode.

The Myrddraal seemed to hesitate as the humans appeared atop the hill, but in the next instant it produced a sword with the black blade Rand remembered so queasily, and waved it over its head. The line of Trollocs scrambled forward.

Even before the Myrddraal moved, Lan's sword was in his hand. "Stay with me!" he cried, and Mandarb plunged down the slope toward the Trollocs. "For the Seven Towers!" he shouted.

Rand gulped and booted the gray forward; the whole group of them streamed after the Warder. He was surprised to find Tam's sword in his fist. Caught up by Lan's cry, he found his own. "Manetheren! Manetheren!"

Perrin took it up. "Manetheren! Manetheren!"

But Mat shouted, "*Carai an Caldazar! Carai an Ellisande! Al Ellisande!*"

The Fade's head turned from the Trollocs to the riders charging toward him. The black sword froze over its head, and the opening of its cowl swiveled, searching among the oncoming horsemen.

Then Lan was on the Myrddraal, as the human folk fell on the Trolloc line. Warder's blade met black steel from the forges at Thakan'dar with a clang like a great bell, the toll echoing in the hollow, a flash of blue light filling the air like sheet lightning.

Beast-muzzled almost-men swarmed around each of the humans, catchpoles and hooks flailing. Only Lan and the Myrddraal did they avoid; those two fought in a clear circle, black horses matching step for step, swords matching stroke for stroke. The air flashed and pealed.

Cloud rolled his eyes and screamed, rearing and lashing out with his hooves at the snarling, sharp-toothed faces surrounding him. Heavy bodies crowded shoulder-to-shoulder around him. Digging his heels in ruthlessly, Rand forced the gray on regardless, swinging his sword with little of the skill Lan had tried to impart, hacking as if hewing wood. *Egwene!* Desperately he searched for her as he kicked the gray onward, slashing a path through the hairy bodies as though chopping undergrowth.

Moiraine's white mare dashed and cut at the slightest touch of the Aes Sedai's hand on the reins. Her face was as hard as Lan's as her staff lashed out. Flame enveloped Trollocs, then burst with a roar that left misshapen forms unmoving on the ground. Nynaeve and Egwene rode close to the Aes Sedai with frantic urgency, teeth bared almost as fiercely as the Trollocs', belt knives in hand. Those short blades would be no use at all if a Trolloc came close. Rand tried to turn Cloud toward them, but the gray had the bit in his teeth. Screaming and kicking, Cloud struggled forward however hard Rand tugged at the reins.

Around the three women a space opened as Trollocs tried to flee from Moiraine's staff, but as they attempted to avoid her, she sought them out. Fires roared, and the Trollocs howled in rage and fury. Above roar and howl crashed the tolling of the Warder's sword against the Myrddraal's; the air flared blue around them, flared again. Again.

A noose on the end of a pole swept at Rand's head. With an awkward slash, he cut the catchpole in two, then hacked the goat-faced Trolloc that held it. A hook caught his shoulder from behind and tangled in his cloak, jerking him backwards. Frantically, almost losing his sword, he clutched

the pommel of his saddle to keep his seat. Cloud twisted, shrieking. Rand hung onto saddle and reins desperately; he could feel himself slipping, inch by inch, falling to the hook. Cloud swung around; for an instant Rand saw Perrin, half out of his saddle, struggling to wrest his axe away from three Trollocs. They had him by one arm and both legs. Cloud plunged, and only Trollocs filled Rand's eyes.

A Trolloc dashed in and seized Rand's leg, forcing his foot free of the stirrup. Panting, he let go of the saddle to stab it. Instantly the hook pulled him out of the saddle, to Cloud's hindquarters; his death-grip on the reins was all that kept him from the ground. Cloud reared and shrieked. And in that same moment the pulling vanished. The Trolloc at his leg threw up its hands and screamed. All of the Trollocs screamed, a howl like all the dogs in the world gone mad.

Around the humans Trollocs fell writhing to the ground, tearing at their hair, clawing their own faces. All of the Trollocs. Biting at the ground, snapping at nothing, howling, howling, howling.

Then Rand saw the Myrddraal. Still upright in the saddle of its madly dancing horse, black sword still flailing, it had no head.

"It won't die until nightfall," Thom had to shout, between heavy breaths, over the unrelenting screams. "Not completely. That is what I've heard, anyway."

"Ride!" Lan shouted angrily. The Warder had already gathered Moiraine and the other two women and had them halfway up the next hill. "This is not all of them!" Indeed, the horns dirged again, above the shrieks of the Trollocs on the ground, to east and west and south.

For a wonder, Mat was the only one who had been unhorsed. Rand trotted toward him, but Mat tossed a noose away from him with a shudder, gathered his bow, and scrambled into his saddle unaided, though rubbing at his throat.

The horns bayed like hounds with the scent of a deer. Hounds closing in. If Lan had set a hard pace before, he doubled it now, till the horses scabbled uphill faster than they had gone down before, then nearly threw themselves at the other side. But still the horns came ever nearer, until the guttural shouts of pursuit were heard whenever the horns paused, until eventually the humans reached a hilltop just as Trollocs appeared on the next hill behind them. The hilltop blackened with Trollocs, snouted, distorted faces howling, and three Myrddraal overawed them all. Only a hundred spans separated the two parties.

Rand's heart shriveled like an old grape. *Three!*

The Myrddraal's black swords rose as one; Trollocs boiled down the slope, thick, triumphant cries rising, catchpoles bobbing above as they ran.

Moiraine climbed down from Aldieb's back. Calmly she removed something from her pouch, unwrapped it. Rand glimpsed dark ivory. The *angreal*. With *angreal* in one hand and staff in the other, the Aes Sedai set her feet, facing the onrushing Trollocs and the Fades' black swords, raised her staff high, and stabbed it down into the earth.

The ground rang like an iron kettle struck by a mallet. The hollow clang dwindled, faded away. For an instant then, it was silent. Everything was silent. The wind died. The Trolloc cries stilled; even their charge forward slowed and stopped. For a heartbeat, everything waited. Slowly the dull ringing returned, changing to a low rumble, growing until the earth moaned.

The ground trembled beneath Cloud's hooves. This was Aes Sedai work like the stories told about; Rand wished he were a hundred miles away. The tremble became a shaking that set the trees around them quivering. The gray stumbled and nearly fell. Even Mandarb and riderless Aldieb staggered as if drunk, and those who rode had to cling to reins and manes, to anything, to keep their seats.

The Aes Sedai still stood as she had begun, holding the *angreal* and her upright staff thrust into the hilltop, and neither she nor the staff moved an inch, for all that the ground shook and shivered around her. Now the ground rippled, springing out from in front of her staff, lapping toward the Trollocs like ripples on a pond, ripples that grew as they ran, toppling old bushes, flinging dead leaves into the air, growing, becoming waves of earth, rolling toward the Trollocs. Trees in the hollow lashed like switches in the hands of small boys. On the far slope Trollocs fell in heaps, tumbled over and over by the raging earth.

Yet as if the ground were not rearing all around them, the Myrddraal moved forward in a line, their dead-black horses never missing a step, every hoof in unison. Trollocs rolled on the ground all about the black steeds, howling and grabbing at the hillside that heaved them up, but the Myrddraal came slowly on.

Moiraine lifted her staff, and the earth stilled, but she was not done. She pointed to the hollow between the hills, and flame gouted from the ground, a fountain twenty feet high. She flung her arms wide, and the fire raced to left and right as far as the eye could see, spreading into a wall separating humans and Trollocs. The heat made Rand put his hands in front of his face, even on the hilltop. The Myrddraal's black mounts, whatever strange

powers they had, screamed at the fire, reared and fought their riders as the Myrddraal beat at them, trying to force them through the flames.

"Blood and ashes," Mat said faintly. Rand nodded numbly.

Abruptly Moiraine wavered and would have fallen had Lan not leaped from his horse to catch her. "Go on," he told the others. The harshness of his voice was at odds with the gentle way he lifted the Aes Sedai to her saddle. "That fire won't burn forever. Hurry! Every minute counts!"

The wall of flame roared as if it would indeed burn forever, but Rand did not argue. They galloped northward as fast as they could make their horses go. The horns in the distance shrilled out disappointment, as if they already knew what had happened, then fell silent.

Lan and Moiraine soon caught up with the others, though Lan led Aldieb by the reins while the Aes Sedai swayed and held the pommel of her saddle with both hands. "I will be all right soon," she said to their worried looks. She sounded tired yet confident, and her gaze was as compelling as ever. "I am not at my strongest when working with Earth and Fire. A small thing."

The two of them moved into the lead again at a fast walk. Rand did not think Moiraine could stay in the saddle at any faster pace. Nynaeve rode forward beside the Aes Sedai, steadying her with a hand. For a time as the party went on across the hills the two women whispered, then the Wisdom delved into her cloak and handed a small packet to Moiraine. Moiraine unfolded it and swallowed the contents. Nynaeve said something more, then fell back with the others, ignoring their questioning looks. Despite their circumstances, Rand thought she had a slight look of satisfaction.

He did not really care what the Wisdom was up to. He rubbed the hilt of his sword continually, and whenever he realized what he was doing, he stared down at it in wonder. *So that's what a battle is like.* He could not remember much of it, not any particular part. Everything ran together in his head, a melted mass of hairy faces and fear. Fear and heat. It had seemed as hot as a midsummer noon while it was going on. He could not understand that. The icy wind was trying to freeze beads of perspiration all over his face and body.

He glanced at his two friends. Mat was scrubbing sweat off his face with the edge of his cloak. Perrin, staring at something in the distance and not liking what he was seeing, appeared unaware of the beads glistening on his forehead.

The hills grew smaller, and the land began to level out, but instead of



pressing on, Lan stopped. Nynaeve moved as if to rejoin Moiraine, but the Warder's look kept her away. He and the Aes Sedai rode ahead and put their heads together, and from Moiraine's gestures it became apparent they were arguing. Nynaeve and Thom stared at them, the Wisdom frowning worriedly, the gleeman muttering under his breath and pausing to stare back the way they had come, but everyone else avoided looking at them altogether. Who knew what might come out of an argument between an Aes Sedai and a Warder?

After a few minutes Egwene spoke to Rand quietly, casting an uneasy eye at the still-arguing pair. "Those things you were shouting at the Trollocs." She stopped as if unsure how to proceed.

"What about them?" Rand asked. He felt a little awkward—warcries were all right for Warders; Two Rivers folk did not do things like that, whatever Moiraine said—but if she made fun of him over it. . . . "Mat must have repeated that story ten times."

"And badly," Thom put in. Mat grunted in protest.

"However he told it," Rand said, "we've all heard it any number of times. Besides, we had to shout something. I mean, that's what you do at a time like that. You heard Lan."

"And we have a right," Perrin added thoughtfully. "Moiraine says we're all descended from those Manetheren people. They fought the Dark One, and we're fighting the Dark One. That gives us a right."

Egwene sniffed as if to show what she thought of that. "I wasn't talking about that. What . . . what was it you were shouting, Mat?"

Mat shrugged uncomfortably. "I don't remember." He stared at them defensively. "Well, I don't. It's all foggy. I don't know what it was, or where it came from, or what it means." He gave a self-deprecating laugh. "I don't suppose it means anything."

"I . . . I think it does," Egwene said slowly. "When you shouted, I thought—just for a minute—I thought I understood you. But it's all gone, now." She sighed and shook her head. "Perhaps you're right. Strange what you can imagine at a time like that, isn't it?"

"*Carai an Caldazar*," Moiraine said. They all twisted to stare at her. "*Carai an Ellisande. Al Ellisande.* For the honor of the Red Eagle. For the honor of the Rose of the Sun. The Rose of the Sun. The ancient warcry of Manetheren, and the warcry of its last king. Eldrene was called the Rose of the Sun." Moiraine's smile took in Egwene and Mat both, though her gaze may have rested a moment longer on him than on her. "The blood of Aemon's line is still strong in the Two Rivers. The old blood still sings."



Mat and Egwene looked at each other, while everyone else looked at them both. Egwene's eyes were wide, and her mouth kept quirking into a smile that she bit back every time it began, as if she was not sure just how to take this talk of the old blood. Mat was sure, from the scowling frown on his face.

Rand thought he knew what Mat was thinking. The same thing he was thinking. If Mat was a descendant of the ancient kings of Manetheren, maybe the Trollocs were really after him and not all three of them. The thought made him ashamed. His cheeks colored, and when he caught a guilty grimace on Perrin's face, he knew Perrin had been having the same thought.

"I can't say that I have ever heard the like of this," Thom said after a minute. He shook himself and became brusque. "Another time I might even make a story out of it, but right now. . . . Do you intend to remain here for the rest of the day, Aes Sedai?"

"No," Moiraine replied, gathering her reins.

A Trolloc horn keened from the south as if to emphasize her word. More horns answered, east and west. The horses whickered and sidled about nervously.

"They have passed the fire," Lan said calmly. He turned to Moiraine. "You are not strong enough for what you intend, not yet, not without rest. And neither Myrddraal nor Trolloc will enter that place."

Moiraine raised a hand as if to cut him off, then sighed and let it fall instead. "Very well," she said irritably. "You are right, I suppose, but I would rather there was any other choice." She pulled her staff from under the girth strap of her saddle. "Gather in around me, all of you. As close as you can. Closer."

Rand urged Cloud nearer the Aes Sedai's mare. At Moiraine's insistence they kept on crowding closer in a circle around her until every horse had its head stretched over the croup or withers of another. Only then was the Aes Sedai satisfied. Then, without speaking, she stood in the stirrups and swung her staff over their heads, stretching to make certain it covered everyone.

Rand flinched each time the staff passed over him. A tingle ran through him with every pass. He could have followed the staff without seeing it, just by following the shivers as it moved over people. It was no surprise to him that Lan was the only one not affected.

Abruptly Moiraine thrust the staff out to the west. Dead leaves whirled into the air and branches whipped as if a dust-devil ran along the line she

pointed to. As the invisible whirlwind vanished from sight she settled back into her saddle with a sigh.

"To the Trollocs," she said, "our scents and our tracks will seem to follow that. The Myrddraal will see through it in time, but by then. . . ."

"By then," Lan said, "we will have lost ourselves."

"Your staff is very powerful," Egwene said, earning a sniff from Nynaeve.

Moiraine made a clicking sound. "I have told you, child, things do not have power. The One Power comes from the True Source, and only a living mind can wield it. This is not even an *angreal*, merely an aid to concentration." Wearily she slid the staff back under her girth strap. "Lan?"

"Follow me," the Warder said, "and keep quiet. It will ruin everything if the Trollocs hear us."

He led the way north again, not at the crashing pace they had been making, but rather in the quick walk with which they had traveled the Caemlyn Road. The land continued to flatten, though the forest remained as thick.

Their path was no longer straight, as it had been before, for Lan chose out a route that meandered over hard ground and rocky outcrops, and he no longer let them force their way through tangles of brush, instead taking the time to make their way around. Now and again he dropped to the rear, intently studying the trail they made. If anyone so much as coughed, it drew a sharp grunt from him.

Nynaeve rode beside the Aes Sedai, concern battling dislike on her face. And there was a hint of something more, Rand thought, almost as if the Wisdom saw some goal in sight. Moiraine's shoulders were slumped, and she held her reins and the saddle with both hands, swaying with every step Aldieb took. It was plain that laying the false trail, small as that might have seemed beside producing an earthquake and a wall of flame, had taken a great deal out of her, strength she no longer had to lose.

Rand almost wished the horns would start again. At least they were a way of telling how far back the Trollocs were. And the Fades.

He kept looking behind them, and so was not the first to see what lay ahead. When he did, he stared, perplexed. A great, irregular mass stretched off to either side out of sight, in most places as high as the trees that grew right up to it, with even taller spires here and there. Leafless vines and creepers covered it all in thick layers. A cliff? *The vines will make climbing easy, but we'll never get the horses up.*

Suddenly, as they rode a little closer, he saw a tower. It was clearly a tower, not some kind of rock formation, with an odd, pointed dome on the

top. "A city!" he said. And a city wall, and the spires were guard towers on the wall. His jaw dropped. It had to be ten times as big as Baerlon. Fifty times as big.

Mat nodded. "A city," he agreed. "But what's a city doing in the middle of a forest like this?"

"And without any people," Perrin said. When they looked at him, he pointed to the wall. "Would people let vines grow over everything like that? You know how creepers can tear down a wall. Look how it's fallen."

What Rand saw adjusted itself in his mind again. It was as Perrin said. Under almost every low place in the wall was a brush-covered hill; rubble from the collapsed wall above. No two of the guard towers were the same height.

"I wonder what city it was," Egwene mused. "I wonder what happened to it. I don't remember anything from papa's map."

"It was called Aridhol," Moiraine said. "In the days of the Trolloc Wars, it was an ally of Manetheren." Staring at the massive walls, she seemed almost unaware of the others, even of Nynaeve, who supported her in the saddle with a hand on her arm. "Later Aridhol died, and this place was called by another name."

"What name?" Mat asked.

"Here," Lan said. He stopped Mandarb in front of what had once been a gate wide enough for fifty men to march through abreast. Only the broken, vine-encrusted watchtowers remained; of the gates there was no sign. "We enter here." Trolloc horns shrieked in the distance. Lan peered in the direction of the sound, then looked at the sun, halfway down toward the treetops in the west. "They have discovered it's a false trail. Come, we must find shelter before dark."

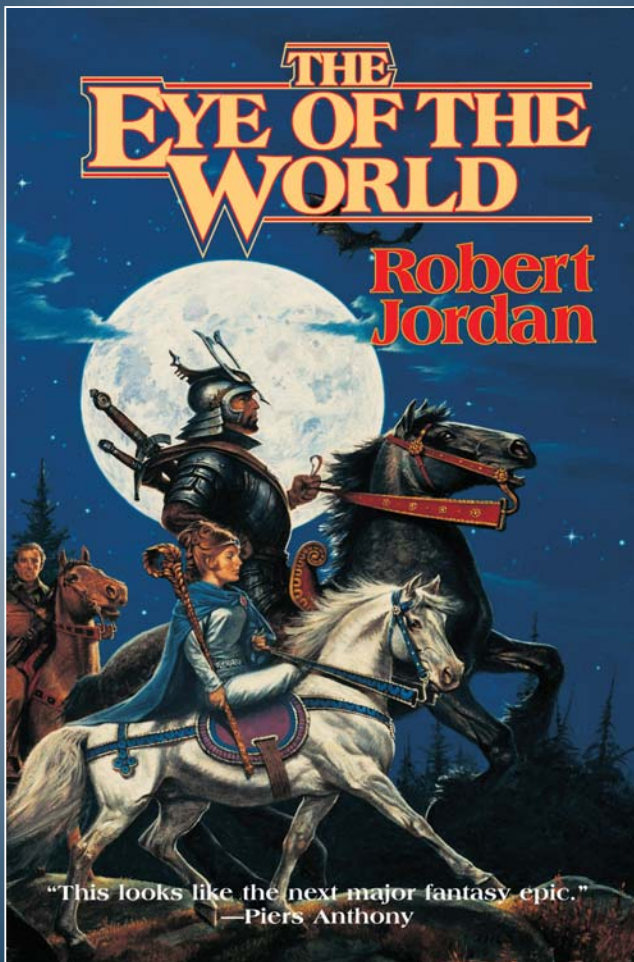
"What name?" Mat asked again.

Moiraine answered as they rode into the city. "Shadar Logoth," she said. "It is called Shadar Logoth."



Find out what happens next—  
keep reading Book One

# THE EYE OF THE WORLD

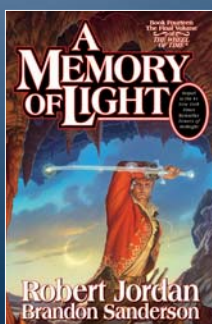
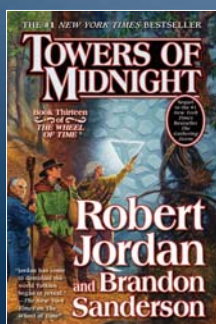
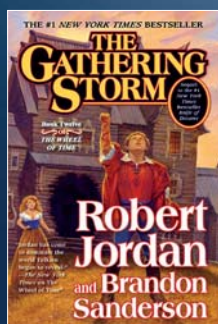
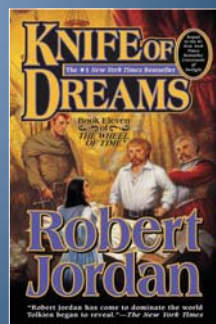
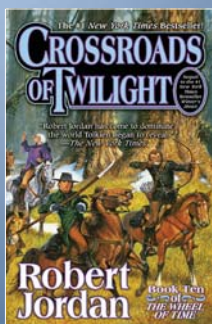
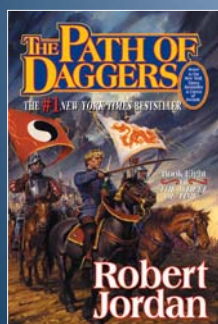
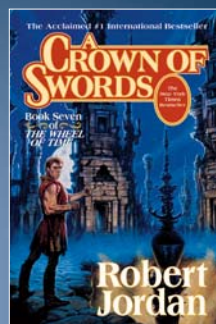
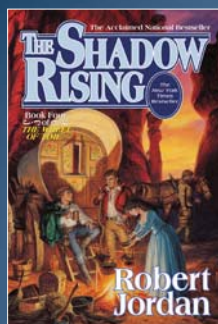
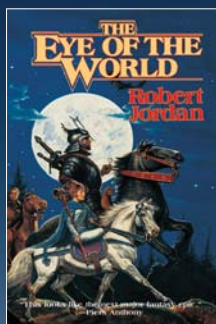


[tor-forge.com](http://tor-forge.com)



# ROBERT JORDAN's THE WHEEL OF TIME®

The  
complete  
series



*A Memory  
of Light*  
On Sale  
January 8, 2013



tor-forge.com