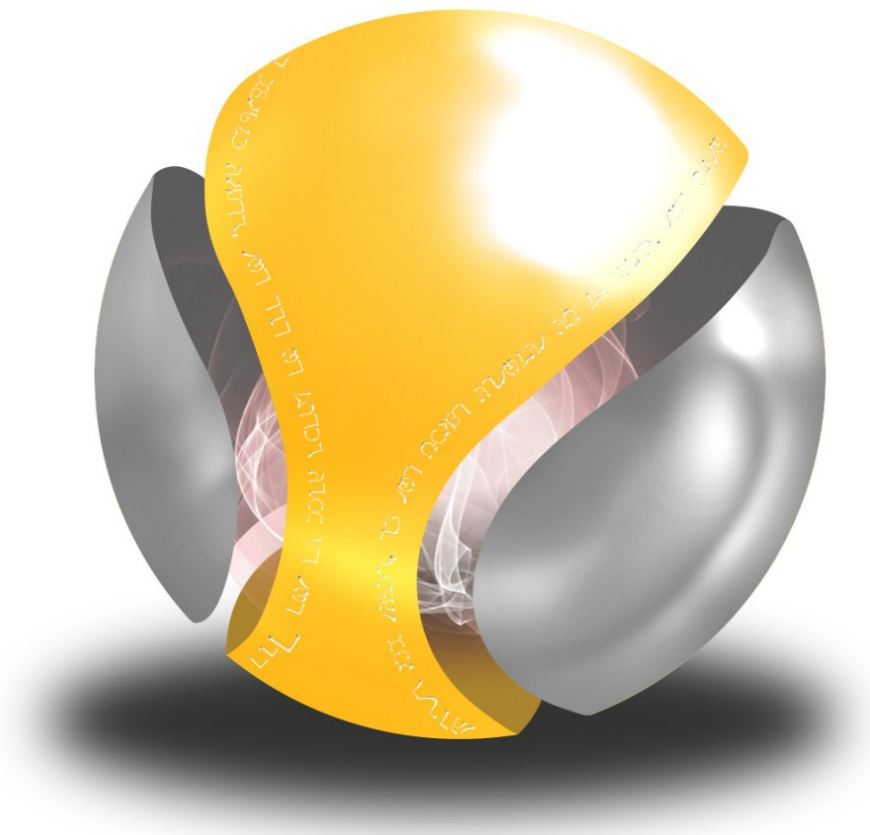


VOLUME ONE OF *THE WHEEL OF TIME : REMIXED*

THE EYE OF THE WORLD

[remix]



YING-SUN HO

Based on *The Wheel of Time* by Robert Jordan and Brandon Sanderson

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by Ying-sun Ho

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thanks to **tsuya yee** and **jennifer o'day** for being guinea pig readers of this experiment in fiction.

and a special thanks to **robert jordan** for creating this world that i've been playing in.

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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. Him they named Dragon.

From *Aleth nin Taerin alta Camora (The Breaking of the World)*
Author unknown, the Second 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 women and men, and the green things failed, and hope died. And men cried out, let the prophecies be fulfilled, let the bane of the Shadow be born as he was in ages past and will be in ages to come. Let the Prince of the Morning sing to the land. Let the green things grow and the valleys give forth lambs. Let the army of the Lord of the Dawn protect 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 Third Age





Book One: The Two Rivers

An Empty Road

This stillness was wrong, somehow. The Quarry Road was never crowded; not many besides the handful of Westwood farmers ever used it. But today was different. Quiet lay heavy on the land, disturbed only by the wind and the soft creak of the cart behind Bela. No birds sang in the forest, no squirrels chattered from branches. Not that Rand expected them, really. Not this spring.

This spring had yet to bring any green with it. Trees that should have had new leaves and shoots stood naked. Snarls of last year's bramble spread brown webs over stone outcrops below the trees. Even weeds were scarce. Most of those were nettles; the rest were the sorts with sharp burrs or thorns, or stinkweed, which left a rank smell on anyone careless enough to step on it. Snow still dotted the ground under tightly clustered trees that never let daylight through. Even the sun seemed to be in shadow; its light held neither strength nor warmth. It was a morning made for unpleasant thoughts.

Walking with his cloak plastered to his back and whipping round his legs, Rand wished for a heavier coat, or at least an extra shirt. The icy wind was better suited to midwinter than the day before Bel Tine. And he was having trouble holding his cloak in place. His left hand held his bow, an arrow nocked and ready to draw. The wind was too strong to hold the cloak one-handed, and before long Rand stopped trying.

Instead, he brought his right hand to his bowstring and ran his thumb idly across the nock of the arrow. Wolves had been out in numbers of late. Winter had been bad enough on the farms, worse than even the oldest folk

remembered, but it must have been even harsher in the mountains to drive so many wolves down into the Two Rivers. They had been raiding the sheep pens and chewing their way into barns to get the cattle and horses. Even men were not safe, daylight or no.

Father seemed unaffected by such thoughts. He set a steady pace beside Bela, using his spear as a walking staff and ignoring the wind that whipped their cloaks about like banners. His cheeks might be lined and his hair mostly white, but he was as strong and solid as ever. It seemed as though a flood could wash around him without uprooting his feet. *He is as unmoving and unfeeling as an oak.*

Rand returned to watching his side of the road. He was glad that people saw little resemblance between him and Father, save perhaps for a breadth of shoulder. Rand was taller by a head— taller than anyone else in the district, really— and had a lankier frame. According to Father, he got his grey eyes and reddish hair from his mother. He didn't remember much about her. He recalled the shape of her smile, the smell of her hair, and the feeling of watching her die. Not much— certainly never enough. Still, he put flowers on her grave every year, at Bel Tine in the spring and at Sunday in the summer.

It was Bel Tine that took them to the village today. The cart held two small casks of Father's apple brandy and eight larger barrels of apple cider, hardened just a touch by a winter's curing. They delivered the same every year to the Winespring Inn for Festival, and Father had sworn that it would take more than wolves or bears or a cold wind to stop them this spring. Even so, they had not ventured off their farm in almost a month, much less to the village. But Father had given his word about the brandy and cider, and Father always kept his word. Rand was just glad for the chance to get off the farm and into town, and more than glad that Bel Tine had almost come.

Rand watched his side of the road for anything unusual, but the farther they walked, the more he felt that *he* was the one being watched. He looked for anyone that might have an eye on him. Nothing moved or made a sound

among the trees except the wind. Still, the feeling only grew stronger. The hairs on his arms stirred; his skin prickled as if it itched on the inside.

Irritated, he shifted his bow to rub at his arms. *Stop letting fancies take you. Nothing stirs here.* He glanced over his shoulder... and blinked. Not more than twenty paces back down the road a cloaked figure on horseback followed them; both horse and rider were black, dull, and ungleaming.

The rider's cloak covered him to his boot tops, the cowl pulled forward so no part of him showed. Even so, Rand felt he was looking right into the man's eyes, and could not look away. Only habit kept him from stopping altogether to stare; as it was, he turned about completely and walked backward alongside the cart. Something was not right about this horseman, something he could not place. Queasiness settled in his stomach. He saw nothing but shadow in the hood, but he felt hatred from the man as sharply as if he could see a snarling face.

A stone caught his heel and he stumbled, dropping his bow to the ground. He turned his eyes to Bela and grabbed at her harness, barely saving himself from falling flat on his back. With a startled snort the mare stopped, twisting her head to see what had caught her.

Father frowned at him over Bela's back. "Are you alright, lad?"

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

"Where?" Father 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. He scanned the forest on both sides of the road. The bare-branched trees offered no hiding place, but he could not see a glimmer of horse or horseman. "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.” Rand snatched up the fallen bow and arrow, hastily checked the fletching before renocking, and half drew. Then he let the bowstring relax. There was nothing to aim at. “He was.”

Father shook his grizzled head. “If you say so, lad. Come on, then. A horse leaves hoofprints, even on this ground. 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.”

Father started toward the rear of the cart, his cloak whipping about. Rand realized then what had been odd about the horseman. The sharp and swirling wind had not shifted so much as a fold of the rider’s black cloak. Rand’s mouth went dry. *Just a trick of the eyes.* He tried to swallow. *Father is right. This is a morning to prickle the imagination.* But he knew, even as he thought it, that the rider was not a trick of the eyes. *How do I explain a vanishing man with a cloak that the wind doesn’t touch?*

Rand frowned and peered more closely into the forest around them. In all his years of exploring and playing in the Westwood, it had never looked like this. It seemed a different place altogether. Strange. Dangerous. Frightening.

“No, Father, there’s no need.”

Father stopped and turned toward Rand, his arched eyebrow inviting an explanation. Rand tugged at the hood of his cloak, trying to hide his fear.

“You’re probably right,” he said. “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,” Father said slowly, “and a mug of ale where it’s warm.” He looked at Rand another long moment, then turned back around and started walking again.

“Yes,” Rand said. “Warm.” He knew Father had meant the inn, but Rand’s thoughts turned to the innkeeper’s daughter. He took his place alongside Bela and resumed his watch, more wary than before.

A long silence gave him hope that his fear had gone unnoticed. That hope died when Father said, “Remember the flame, lad, and the void.”

The flame and the void. Father’s trick for staying calm, for staying in control. Rand had heard it a thousand times: *Imagine a single flame. Concentrate on it. Feed all your passions into it—fear, hate, anger, joy—until your mind becomes empty.* Become one with the void, Father said, and you could do anything.

Rand had never had much luck with it, himself. Perhaps it was easy for Father to cast aside his passions, but Rand’s were more stubborn. It didn’t bother him much, though. The flame, the void—the whole thing was just another of Father’s many eccentricities. Nobody else in the village talked that way. But Father put it on his word that the flame and the void won him the archery competition every Bel Tine. Rand had his doubts, but they remained unspoken.

It was plain Father had marked Rand’s anxiety, and Rand waited for him to say more. Instead, he just clucked Bela back into motion and they resumed their journey, Father striding along as if nothing untoward had happened and nothing untoward could. Rand wished he could do the same. 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 the rider had just been his imagination, but nothing imaginary could have radiated such hatred. There *had* been someone. And that someone had meant him harm.

Rand kept looking back as they walked. He was so focused on keeping an eye behind them that he hardly noticed when the high-peaked, thatched roofs of Emond’s Field rose up around him.

The Braid

Egwene left without getting another look at the strangers. She had dallied half the morning away, hoping to see them as they left their rooms. Now she was late to the Raising, and in this of all years. She took her time walking downstairs and saying goodbye to Papa in the common room. But once she stepped out the front door, she gathered up her skirts and half ran across the first footbridge and onto the Green.

At the far end of the large meadow she could see a score of women getting the Spring Pole ready for Bel Tine. She hurried along the north bank of the Winespring Water almost all the way to the stone outcrop where it began, rushing out with strength enough to knock a man down. When she got to the women, a few in the front looked at her and smiled. The rest kept doing what they had been doing.

“Come, dear, help us tie some of these ribbons,” Mistress Luhhan said. “The Pole is almost ready.”

Egwene looked at the Spring Pole. It was probably twenty feet long, the trunk of a straight and slender fir stripped of all its branches. The women were busy tying ribbons from top to bottom, ribbons in a dozen colors, cut from old rags and worn-out clothes. Normally they would have wreathed the Pole in fresh garland before tying on the ribbons, but there was not enough greenery this spring. Even the Green itself did not deserve the name. Where it wasn't the yellow-brown of dead grass, it was the black of bare earth.

Egwene sat down, grabbed a handful of colorful strips, and started to tie.

“Egwene! Good morning!” Mistress Calder was wide, with a flat nose and big cheeks, and a smile more in her eyes than in her mouth. “This is a big day for you.”

Egwene looked down at the ground and kept tying ribbons. “Yes, ma’ am,” she murmured.

When she lifted her eyes, Mistress Calder was looking at her, gaze steady and head tilted a bit to the side. *What does the woman want, some bubbly, giggling proclamation that this is the best day of my life? Well, she’ll get none.* Egwene ran her fingers through her hair, all the way from her crown to where it ended just above her navel. It felt thick and smooth and young. The ribbons felt bitter and exhausted by comparison.

When she had tied off the last of her ribbons, a strip cut from an old red dishcloth, Egwene looked up to grab another handful. Across the Green she saw Rand and his father walking along the Quarry Road toward the inn. Bela was between them, pulling a cart. That would be the brandy.

She had waited eagerly for Bel Tine, knowing it would bring Master al’ Thor down to the village the day before to deliver his brandy. Knowing that he would bring Rand with him, and they would have to stay the night in Papa’s inn for Festival. Knowing that weeks of being separated from Rand by that long stretch of the Westwood between the al’ Thor farm and the village proper would end. So she had counted the days until Bel Tine and near to burst with anticipation.

That was before the Women’s Council meeting. Now seeing Rand made her... uneasy. Uncertain. She still got the tremulous chill in her fingers and toes, the same lightheaded *awakeness* of excitement. But she also got a queasy stomach and a panicked tightening in her throat. The thought of Rand was just like the brandy they had snuck away during Sunday: intoxicating and nauseous, all at once.

It had always been so simple. She and Rand, they had been doomed from the start, and neither of them needed to talk about it. Stealing kisses and sneaking around had been thrilling and dangerous and fun. But now...

Would he feel differently now? Would she? Would they want each other as they had before? Would one need more, or less? Every day the village felt smaller, more confining. Sometimes thinking about Rand made those feelings go away, and sometimes it made them worse.

“Alright, everyone. I think the Pole is ready,” Mistress Luhhan said. “Egwene, dear, why don’t you go stand with Jema Dautry? It’s time for the Raising.”

Jarred from her reverie, Egwene looked toward Mistress Luhhan, then at Mistress Dautry standing alongside the Spring Pole. Mistress Dautry was holding a six-foot-long staff that forked at one end like a giant lizard’s tongue. A raising rod. *Right, the Raising.* Egwene shook her head. *That boy will be the death of me.* She stood up, walked over to Mistress Dautry, and took hold of the raising rod with her.

Mistress Calder and Mistress Ayellin stood across the Pole from Egwene, holding a raising rod of their own. Mistresses Aybara and Laila Lewin had theirs a bit closer to the base of the Pole, as did Mistresses Thane and Torfinn standing opposite them. Mistress Luhhan, looking every bit the blacksmith’s wife with her thick arms and broad back, stood alone at the top of the Pole. She made eye contact with each pair of women, and then counted off.

“One!” Mistress Luhhan’s voice seemed to shatter the cold and arid air.

“Two!” Egwene tensed her arms, ready to push.

“Three!” Mistress Luhhan grabbed the top of the Pole with her bare hands and lifted. She brought it first to shoulder height, then extended her arms and lifted it far above her head.

“Now!” Egwene and Mistress Dautry jammed their raising rod up against the Spring Pole, as did the two women across from them. With the long Spring Pole caught between their staffs, the women pushed it another six feet into the air and held it there. Mistress Luhhan, the top of the Pole now lifted well out of her reach, walked around to its base.

“Go!” The last two pairs of women caught the Pole between their raising rods and added their strength to the push. Egwene strained with all she had; the Spring Pole seemed less like dead weight and more like an active force, throwing everything it had against her. As the Pole climbed closer and closer to its full height, Mistress Luhhan guided the base into a three-foot-deep posthole that the women had dug well before Egwene arrived. Egwene saw the Pole begin to slide down, heard it hit bottom, and felt the force she had been pushing against disappear. She let go of her raising rod and fell to the ground, laughing from the exertion.

Sitting down, she leaned back with her arms extended behind her and looked up. The sky was completely clear. She saw a few ravens, but even they could not darken her mood. The Spring Pole was up and Bel Tine was coming. Surely that meant the winter would soon release its hold of the land. Surely.

The Spring Pole looks quite nice, even without a garland. And those ribbons are prettier than I thought. She studied the long colorful ropes that hung from the very tip. *Tomorrow, I'll be holding one of those and dancing my first Spring Circle.* She brought her eyes back down to the ground and saw Mistress Luhhan smiling at her with a look both motherly and mischievous.

“Well, the Pole is ready for you,” she said. “But you don’t look quite ready for it, dear. Perhaps it’s time to go see your mother. I’m sure she could use a break from the cooking.”

Egwene gave a nervous smile.

“Yes, Mistress Luhhan. I suppose she could.”

She stood up and looked over at the Quarry Road. Rand and his father were nowhere to be seen. They must have already reached the inn; they would be at the front door, on the far side from where she stood. Just as well. She circled round the Winespring and walked along the south bank of the stream back toward the inn.

What will I say if I see Rand? He wouldn't be able to know anything just by looking at her. Not just yet, anyway. She ran and walked and skipped her way back across the Green until she reached the rear entrance of the inn, the one that led directly into the kitchen. She felt dizzy and anxious and slightly out of time with everything around her. Almost as if she didn't quite fit.

She opened the door and walked right into Mama.

"Girl, you'll— well, never mind. Come in, come in. Just make sure that cat gets out before you close the door. She's been driving me crazy."

Egwene took a breath as the cat raced by her. "Hi, Mama."

Mama paused in her walk back into the kitchen and turned around.

"Oh my. Look at you." Mama put on her proud and joyful smile. That was Egwene's favorite.

Egwene just stood there smiling, making only fleeting eye contact with Mama. Despite her best efforts, she was feeling excited and nervous and overwhelmed. *Like a little girl.*

"Well, let's get you upstairs already," Mama said. "The stew can sit for a while, and the honeycakes just went in this minute."

Mama took her apron off and left it on a hook at the entrance to the kitchen. She grabbed Egwene's shoulders, spun her around, and nudged her up the narrow, spiraling staircase that led to the family's own rooms at the back of the second floor. When they got to her parents' bedchamber, Mama opened the door and shooed Egwene in, pointing to a seat in front of the dresser. The top of the dresser was clear except for a brush and a simple but beautiful leather cord. Egwene sat down, laid her fingers on the cord, and looked up at her reflection in the mirror above the dresser.

"Aren't you just lovely, sweetie," Mama said. "Just lovely."

Mama set to brushing her hair, ten strokes on one side, ten strokes on the other, back and forth and back again.

“You’re going to dazzle them at Festival tomorrow,” Mama said. “What young man won’t be tripping over himself to stake his claim to your heart by the afternoon? None, I dare say. Not a one.”

“Great,” said Egwene. “That’s just what I need. Mat and Ewin and, and Rand and the rest to come skulking about the inn. Won’t Papa be thrilled. And no less than I.”

“Hmm.”

Mama didn’t say anything for a while, and Egwene started to get nervous. *Does she know? About me and Rand? She couldn’t. If she did, she would have already—*

“Now,” Mama said, breaking in on Egwene’s thoughts. “Tell me how you are feeling. A big change, today. That can be exciting, but it can be frightening, too. Whatever you feel is alright, love. It has all been felt before, by hundreds of girls, on hundreds of days just like today.”

Mama put down the brush and pulled Egwene’s hair back tight. She could feel it as Mama split her hair into three sections and started twining them together.

“I don’t know, Mama. When I was little, I couldn’t wait for this day, just like every other girl. But even then I knew I wanted something more. I don’t *want* to be just like every other girl. I don’t want this to be the first day of a life that any village woman could lead. I want something bigger. Today just feels so... so far away from that.”

Mama’s hands stopped for a moment, then went right on again.

“I think I understand, love. Yes, I think I do. But bear in mind, there’s no life, average or otherwise, that doesn’t go through today. The same will be true tomorrow, and every day after that. Every day our childhood slips

further into the past, and every day its fantasies and fancies hold less sway over our hearts. Before you know it, you will have escaped Papa's big shadow, and mine too. And however your life turns out, I will love and cherish you— even if it is just the life of a village woman.”

Egwene looked Mama's reflection in the eye. *You know I've never doubted that, Mama. But if you think I describe a childhood fancy, then you love me better than you know me.*

“I guess,” she said aloud. “I just have dragonflies in my stomach.”

Mama's hands stopped. Her right hand reached for the leather cord while her left held a tight grip on Egwene's hair.

“Don't worry, sweetie. Everything is going beautifully for you. Just be a little patient.”

Mama tied off the cord and dropped her hands to her sides. Egwene's hair was in a braid. She was a woman grown now. A woman grown.

Strangers

Perrin put the sledgehammer back on its wall hook and flopped down on the bench. His shoulders ached. He stretched his arms out along the three-foot stone wall that surrounded the open-air smithy and leaned back until he saw nothing but the grey sky overhead. When he brought his eyes back to earth, Master Luhhan had already put his tongs up and was taking off his apron and leather vest.

“That’s a good day’s work, Perrin,” he said as he wiped his brow and pushed the hair back from his face. “Just the thing to make Winternight and Bel Tine all the finer.”

“Aye, I figure you’re right, there, sir.” Perrin took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Though, speaking true, I’m more eager for a sound night’s sleep than for Festival.”

“I imagine that will change soon enough,” laughed Master Luhhan.

Perrin smiled. Master Luhhan’s laugh was warm and thick and rich, like the late summer sun, and he hadn’t heard it much these last few months. The longer winter went, the less laughter had graced Emond’s Field in general. It was as true in the smithy as anywhere else.

Master Luhhan walked up beside Perrin and patted him on the shoulder. “No need to bank the fire, not with Festival tomorrow. Douse it, clean up quickly and let’s get ready for Winternight, eh? I have a Village Council meeting to get to.” Master Luhhan hung his apron and vest on the pegboard to Perrin’s right and walked out of the smithy and into his house. Perrin pushed himself up from the bench and set about closing out the day.

First he took the long rake and reached into the forge. He pulled all of the coal away from the tuyère to starve it of air, then closed the flue. The charcoal would be cool by the time he finished cleaning up the rest of the smithy. Next he collected the stray bits of coal from the floor and the workbench and returned them to the hod. He did the same with any extra iron bits lying around the smithy, adding them to the iron stock. Finally, he took the broom and swept the day's dust out the back gate.

When he was done sweeping, he stood at the back gate and looked out at the tree line for a long moment. *Nothing out there. Nothing at all.*

“See anything interesting?”

Perrin turned to see Mat perched on the wall behind him, a long blade of grass hanging out the side of his crooked smile.

“I thought I set eyes on a ghost hound,” Perrin said with a grin, “but he disappeared afore I could be sure of it.”

“Oy, don't make jokes.” Mat walked over to Perrin and the two hopped up to sit on the wall, looking out from the smithy. “Master Luhhan talked to my da, and now I'm on strict punishment. Or will be after Bel Tine, give thanks for small favors.”

Perrin shook his head and chuckled. Mat was never like to grow up.

“Boy, you should've heard Mistress Luhhan yelling. It took her half a day to get the house clean of flour.”

“Yeah, well,” said Mat, sounding more sulky than sorry, “if she ain't leave the door open, the dogs never would've gotten in the house in the first place.” Mat paused. “Ain't my fault, really.”

Perrin just looked at Mat. Mat smiled.

“Well, it was worth it anyway,” he said. “Just to see Adan and Ewal and Dag's faces. They really thought those were ghost hounds.” Mat laughed

hard and hearty at the memory.

Perrin couldn't help but smile back. "Yeah, well, you'd best make tracks afore Master Luhhan sees you. You had to use the Luhhan dogs for the prank?"

"Yeah, no, I ain't trying to stay around. But you're coming with me." Mat looked excited. "We have strangers in town. Real strangers! Last night—"

Perrin turned sharply to Mat and cut him off. "Last night? A man on horseback?" he asked. "A man in a black cloak, on a black horse?"

Mat swallowed his grin and dropped his voice to a scratchy whisper. "A rider? In black?"

Mat had mischief in his bones and could say anything with a straight face, but his eyes always told the truth. You just had to know how to read them. Perrin did.

"You saw him, too! I *knew* I wasn't seeing things. Where? When?"

Mat looked hesitant to speak. "Three days ago. I saw him standing on the Old Road, just outside of the village proper. He was just... staring at me. I—he scared me. Don't laugh."

Perrin didn't say anything for a second, looking back toward the tree line. *Nothing out there.*

"I ain't laughing," he said. "I saw him, too. Last night, out at the edge of the village. Not on the North Road, though. Just out there." He pointed east toward the trees. "I've been scared ever since. Why do you think I was staring out there when you walked up? I've been doing it all day, afraid I might see him again, but also afraid I'd conjured the whole of it from nothing."

"Me too. Been checking over my shoulder for the better part of three days. I don't think I've ever been so scared. All he did was sit on his horse looking

at me. And it was like I couldn't look away. Like our eyes were locked together, though I couldn't even see his. I finally tore my eyes away— just for a second— and when I looked back, he was gone. Vanished, like.”

Perrin let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. “That's what happened to me. You speak it as if you were there. I'll take oath, that man was evil. Ain't nothing should be that scary. Especially just from looking at you. Master Luhhan thinks I was jumping at shadows under the trees.”

Mat nodded glumly. “So does my da. I told Dav, and Elam Dowtry. They've been watching like hawks ever since, but they say they ain't seen nothing. After the ghost hounds, Elam thinks I'm trying to trick him. And Dav thinks he's just down from Taren Ferry— a sheepstealer, or a chickenthief. A chickenthief!” He lapsed into silence, looking outright offended.

“Boy,” said Perrin, “I'd give up all the farms in town to learn it was just a chickenthief.”

“Burn me, but that man wasn't no chickenthief. And if he's been around here, I'd as soon not be.” Mat shook his head as if trying to clear it. When he looked back up at Perrin, he had excitement in his eyes again. “I say, let's go see these strangers. They ain't no black riders, that's sure. It's a man and a highborn lady come to town round sunset yesterday. They're at the inn. Strangers! Let's go see! You're done with your chores, and I finished mine before coming over.”

Perrin hesitated. “Alright, I'm game. But don't be surprised to see me look over my shoulder a dozen times or more.”

Perrin grabbed a cloak and they set out for the Winespring Inn, which was just a little ways upstream from the smithy. They walked in silence for a while, hearing only the wintry wind, the sound of the stream, and their own footsteps falling.

If Master Luhhan didn't believe, and Mat's da didn't neither, no one's like to. Perrin couldn't shake the feeling that the rider was dangerous, and that the adults needed to do something about him. And strangers. When's the

last time we had a stranger? Five years ago? That man trying to hide from trouble up Baerlon way? Strangers and the rider at the same time— might be coincidence, might not. Too many questions, and answers to none.

Frustrated, he kicked hard at a rock on the path and sent it flying toward the water. He expected to hear a splash, but instead heard a little squeal. The stone had hit someone down on the bank. Perrin and Mat both stretched their necks to see who it was. A round little face rose up from the weeds— Ewin Finngar. When he saw Mat and Perrin, Ewin started running toward them, his pudgy face shining and eager. “Perrin! Mat! Heyo. Wait till you hear. We have strangers in the village!”

“Aye, we know,” said Mat. “We were just gonna see if we could get a peek at them. Are they about?”

Ewin fought to catch his breath. “Already know, eh? Well did you know this? I hear the council brought a gleeman for Bel Tine. A gleeman!”

That *was* news. There had been rumors of fireworks, but Perrin had heard nothing of a gleeman.

“Where’d you hear that, then?” asked Perrin.

“I overheard Rand talking about it with his pa and the Mayor. While they were unloading Master al’ Thor’s apple brandy. Heard it clear as day. Master al’ Thor said, ‘The quicker you get the cider into Master al’ Vere’s cellar, the quicker you can see the gleeman.’ A gleeman!”

Ewin looked right proud of having broken the news to them. That was no surprise. He was three years younger than Mat and Perrin, and Rand for that matter. He was always trying to look good in their eyes. Well, if he was proud, he had earned it. A gleeman. Perrin could remember only two gleemen coming into the Two Rivers in his whole life, one when he was so young he watched from atop Da’s shoulders. To have one there during Bel Tine, with his harp and his flute and his stories and all... Emond’s Field would be talking about this Festival ten years off.

The Winespring Inn was just fifty paces away now. Maybe they could see the gleeman *and* the strangers. Perrin looked at Mat and both hastened toward the inn.

“Have you seen him?” asked Mat.

“No, I ain’t.” Ewin jogged to catch up, squeezing in between the two of them. “But I did see the strangers earlier today. It’s a man and a woman. He looks as deadly as nightshade, and she has a cloak that’s as blue as the sky and ten times fancier than any feastday clothes I ever saw. She’s ten times prettier than anybody I ever saw, too. And their horses. I never saw horses so tall, nor so sleek. They look like they could run forever. I think he works for her.”

“In service,” Mat broke in. “They call it being in service, in the stories.”

Ewin nodded. “Just so. But not like a hired man. A soldier, maybe, with his sword and those eyes. He makes the merchants’ guards look like cur dogs. His name is Lan. And I heard him call her Moiraine. She’s a highborn lady if anyone ever was. Lady Moiraine and Lan. Just so.”

Ewin was leading the way now as they reached the Winespring Inn. Nobody seemed to be about. “They left the inn around noontime,” Ewin said, “and I don’t think they’re back as yet. We can probably just wait in the common room—”

Ewin was almost to the door with Mat trailing by a few paces, but Perrin pulled up short behind them. Something was wrong. *I’m being watched*. He looked around. He could see only a bit of the Green beyond the inn. A few children were running around there, but none were paying him any mind. He scanned the houses along the north bank of the river but didn’t see anyone outside. Instead of walking to the front door, Perrin walked along the east wall, looking to see if anyone was spying from behind the inn. About halfway to the back of the building, he stopped and looked up.

A large raven was perched on the edge of the roof, swaying slightly in the gusting wind. Its head was cocked to one side, and one beady, black eye

looked for all the world like it was focused on him. It was eerie and vexing and altogether odd.

“Filthy carrion eater,” he muttered.

“I am tired of being stared at,” Mat growled. Perrin hadn’t realized that Mat had stepped up beside him and was also frowning at the raven. He must have felt it watching, too, or else come looking for Perrin.

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

The two stones flew true, but the raven just 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. It was utterly unafraid, giving no sign that anything had happened.

Perrin 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, neither.”

“A vile animal,” came a woman’s voice from behind them, “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, Perrin and Mat turned right to follow the bird’s swift flight north, but it veered westward and was soon on the other side of the inn. Perrin turned farther right until his eyes fell on the woman who had spoken. She, too, had been watching the raven fly away, but now she turned back to them and her eyes met his. He could only stare. This had to be the Lady Moiraine. She was everything that Ewin had said, everything and more.

For some reason he had pictured her as old; she was not. In fact, at first he thought she must be no older than his sister Adora, five years his senior.

Then he thought she must be a great deal older than that; something in her eyes spoke of an elder's wisdom. Really, the longer he looked at her, the less sure he felt trying to pin any age on her at all. But if he couldn't tell her age, he could see why Ewin named her a lady from a gleeman's tale. She looked so graceful and noble that Perrin felt awkward and clumsy just standing there. With her barely reaching his chest, even his height felt ungainly and... *inappropriate*.

She was unlike anyone he had ever seen before. Under the wide hood of her cloak, her dark hair hung in soft ringlets; he had never seen a grown woman with her hair unbraided. 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 shimmered as she moved, a darker blue than the cloak, with cream sleeves and trim and underskirt. She wore a sparkling blue stone in the middle of her forehead, hanging from a delicate silver chain headband that fastened in her hair. The chain seemed to match the ring on the second finger of her left hand, a silver serpent biting its own tail. He had never seen its like, but he recognized the Great Serpent. It was a symbol for eternity even older than the Wheel of Time.

Fancier than any feastday clothes. I'll say. No one ever dresses like that here. Not ever.

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

"Good morning, Lady Moiraine," Mat echoed, only a touch more smoothly.

She smiled and Perrin's face grew even warmer. *What can I do for her? Something that would let me stay near her. Anything to stay.* He knew she was smiling at all of them, but it felt like she was smiling for him alone. It really was just like seeing a gleeman's tale come to life. He looked to his left and saw a foolish grin on Mat's face.

"You know my name," she said, sounding delighted. "But you must call me Moiraine, not 'Lady.' And what are your names?"

Before Mat or Perrin could speak, Ewin leapt forward from out of nowhere. “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.”

Perrin saw Mat roll his eyes.

“I shall have to see,” she replied, smiling and putting a hand on Ewin’s shoulder. “I do not know how well I could compete against a gleeman, Ewin. But you must all call me Moiraine.” She turned to Perrin and Mat. “And how are you two called?”

“I’m Matrim Cauthon, Lady—I mean, Moiraine,” Mat said. He made a stiff, jerking bow, then went red in the face as he straightened.

Perrin abandoned any thoughts of making his own bow and 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. She wore a small, secretive smile. *What’s behind that smile?*

“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 Perrin was surprised when she pressed a coin into his palm, closing his hand around it with both of hers.

“No need for—” 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 Perrin’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. We have 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?” Mat hesitated as she turned away. She stopped and looked back over her shoulder; he swallowed and went on. “Why have you come to Emond’s Field?”

Oy! Mat couldn’t be mannerly if his hide depended on it. “Don’t mind him, Mistress,” Perrin cut in. “He means no harm. It’s just, it’s just... see, no one comes into the Two Rivers except the merchants, and peddlers when the snow ain’t too deep to get down from Baerlon. Almost no one. Certainly no one like you. The merchants’ guards, they sometimes call this the back end of forever, and I suppose it must seem that way to anyone from outside. We... we were just wondering,” he finished weakly.

Her smile faded, and for a long moment she merely looked at them. “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?” Mat said. “What ever happened here to interest someone like— I mean, what could have happened here?”

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

“As the Wheel of Time turns, places wear many names,” Moiraine said with a distant look in her eyes that made Perrin wonder if she were speaking to them or to herself. “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.”

Perrin stared at her, feeling stupid for not understanding and too embarrassed to ask what she meant. He felt almost guilty for having heard it

at all. He looked over at the other two and saw that they were at least as lost as he was. 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 Perrin hadn't noticed moved away from the back corner of the east wall and followed her, one hand resting on the long hilt of a sword. His clothes were a dark greyish green that would have faded into leaf or shadow, and his cloak swirled through shades of grey and green and brown as it shifted in the wind. It almost seemed to disappear at times, fading into whatever lay beyond it. His hair was long and grey 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 grey in his hair. *When he moves, he looks like a wolf.*

The man gazed at them as he walked past, his eyes as cold and blue as a midwinter dawn. It was as if he were weighing them in his mind, and his face gave no sign 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.

"That was Lan," Ewin whispered. He had no real cause for quiet, but 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,” Perrin answered slowly. “They say the inn’s been here for a thousand years, maybe more.”

All three turned to look at the old building. The foundation was ancient, made of stone that local legend said came from the mountains. Above that, the two-storey structure had clearly been assembled in two stages. The ground floor, where the common room, guest rooms, and kitchen were, was made of river rock. It was old and weatherworn, though of more recent vintage than the foundation. The first storey, where Master al’ Vere and his family lived, was newer— it was whitewashed and jugged out over the ground floor. And the gleaming red roof— the only tile roof in the village— was only a few years old.

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, its trunk thirty paces around and its spreading branches as thick as a man. In the summer, Master al’ Vere set tables and benches under the shade of those branches where people could enjoy a cup and a cooling breeze while they talked or perhaps set out a board for a game of stones. There were no tables now.

“A thousand years of sheep,” Mat said, breaking the lingering silence.

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

Perrin opened his hand to look at the coin she had given him, and almost dropped it in surprise. He did not recognize the mark— a raised image of a woman balancing a single flame on her upturned hand— but he could guess the value of the fat piece of silver. He had watched Master al’ Vere weigh out the coins merchants brought from a dozen lands, and not many were as thick or heavy as the one in his hand. *This will 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 Ewin could not, 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?” Perrin asked finally.

“I don’t know,” Mat said firmly, “and I don’t care. I won’t spend it, neither. Even when the peddler comes.” With that he thrust his coin into his coat pocket.

Nodding, Perrin 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?” Ewin looked like to panic with indecision.

“Not unless you want to,” Mat said.

“I think she gave it to you to spend,” Perrin 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.

Perrin fingered the coin in his pocket, knowing with firm certainty that it was not to be spent. *Why would she give me such a coin? What will she ask us to do in return? And do she and that man with the sword have any connection to the black rider?*

Perrin had met the strangers, and now he had more questions than ever.

News of the World Outside

Tam turned his mug in his hands and stared out the window. At least the Wisdom was not allowed in these meetings. She would have had even less patience than he for this exchange— and shown no mercy at all for the men taking part.

“Cenn, that is enough,” he heard Bran say. Bran’s voice was deep and clear like the sky on Sunday night, and it echoed lightly in the empty common room of the Winespring Inn. Tam brought his eyes away from the window and back to the seven other men gathered around the fireplace. Made of river rock, it stretched half the length of the large, square room, with a lintel as high as a man’s shoulder. The crackling blaze on the hearth held back the chill from outside, but even the loud pops coming from the burning logs could not drown out this pointless conversation.

He drew on his pipe as Bran continued. “You have no say,” he said. “We have no say. The last thing we need now is for the Village Council and the Women’s Circle to start meddling in each other’s affairs.”

“Agreed,” said Haral Luhhan. His warm, musical voice seemed to have no rough edges; it belied his broad and powerful blacksmith’s build and coarse linen clothes.

“No. Most definitely *not* agreed.” Cenn struggled visibly to control his frustration. The old thatcher looked every bit his 74 years, and he had only gotten more ill-tempered with age. “The Wisdom may be chosen by the Women’s Circle, but she is responsible to all the village, including this Council. The al’Meara girl is too young. She knows her healing, true, and

I've no doubt she'll be a fine Wisdom. *In time.* But right now she is too green, too temperamental. Granted, it must be eating her from the inside out, that promise she made of a mild winter and a good harvest. But that doesn't give her the right to scowl and stomp off whenever someone asks her what the wind says."

Cenn paused before finishing, "She's meant to lead this village, to be Bran's equal. Instead she is a child, and acting the part. The girl is not ready. If the Women's Circle won't act, then we had damned well better."

Tam looked at the seven other men gathered round the fire. At the top, directly across from the hearth, Bran was clearly as vexed with Cenn as Cenn was with him. But Tam also saw a few heads nodding at Cenn's words, a few eyes lost in thought as they sipped at their spiced cider. *Cenn is as stubborn as stone, and spiteful besides. But churlish or no, he is not altogether wrong.*

"As I remember, it took Bran a little while to grow into his post, too," Tam said, looking first at Cenn and then at the Mayor. "Nynaeve has not always lived up to her new position, true. But neither have her transgressions been so severe as to warrant our interference in Women's Circle business. I say we try to deal with the immediate crisis: this endless winter. Let this matter of the Wisdom sit for another day. For another season, even."

All eyes turned to Cenn. He looked Tam in the eye, chin held high, before nodding his assent. "Aye, good enough. 'Endless' is right. Bel Tine it well may be, but you'll see nary a fresh shoot in most men's fields. The al'Meara girl refuses to answer you if you ask when spring will come. And has anyone even seen a stork? Just one?"

"I cannot speak for everyone," Bran broke in, "but I know Mistress al'Donel has not. I spent twenty minutes this morning explaining to her that I can no more make the storks return and nest for spring than I can keep the sun from rising. Did she believe me?"

Tam chuckled, as did most everyone there except Cenn.

“In any case,” Bran continued, “spring is still in hiding, at best.”

“Maybe spring isn’t in hiding,” Cenn said. “Maybe winter killed it. What if that’s why al’ Meara won’t say what she hears on the wind? What if it says that this winter will last until the Wheel turns and the Age ends?”

Tam sighed. “We need to worry less about *what if* and more about *what is*. If it does not warm enough for crops to sprout soon, more than one root cellar will come up empty before harvest. We will not have to wait for wolves to kill us off. Hunger will beat them to it.”

“I say we send to Baerlon,” said Samel, “see if they can help. I’ll make the ride. We should probably see if Watch Hill or Deven Ride wants to send someone, too, or even Taren Ferry.”

Tam nodded. Samel Crowe was the youngest man on the Council, just 26 years old. He was still finding his way as a Councilman and did not speak very often in meetings, but nearly all of his contributions were helpful.

“Aye, that sounds right to me,” Tam said. “That’s a long ride, though. I will make it with you.”

Haral nodded, as did Jon Thane. Even Cenn seemed to agree. “Fair enough, Crowe, fair enough. That’s a good idea,” he said, looking at Samel. He leaned forward in his chair a bit and turned his eyes toward Bran. “How long do we wait? Because al’ Thor is right. We wait much longer and it’ll be too late.”

“What do the farmers say?” asked Bran. “How long can we wait?”

Tam looked at Samel and Kevrim al’ Azar and Jon Ayellin. “Three weeks?”

Kevrim spoke up. “I say two. Better wary than wounded.”

Tam nodded, as did the other two farmers.

Jon Thane let out a big breath. “Very good. Bran, I dare say we’re ready for a vote. We’ve spent long enough on this.”

“Aye,” Bran said. “All in favor of sending a party out to Baerlon, along with anyone that the other villages want to send, in two weeks’ time, to see if we can get some emergency stores, whether by gift, trade, or loan, to see us through the end of this long winter?”

Bran watched as hands went up one by one around the semicircle. When the seventh man’s hand signaled agreement, he raised his, too.

“Then it’s resolved,” he said.

Tam hoped that journey would prove unnecessary. He dared not believe it, though.

“Now, for more pleasant matters,” Bran continued, breaking into the infectious smile that had done as much as anything else to keep him wearing the Mayor’s Scales these last twenty years. “Crops or no, Bel Tine is upon us. From what I can tell, everything is on schedule and going smoothly. Unless I miss my guess, the Spring Pole is already up. This morning I saw the mounds for the bonfires; they’re well underway. As for our responsibilities, the gleeman that we sent for, Master Merrill, arrived late last night. I’m sure many of you already knew that, what with how loud he pounded on the door. Woke up my whole family. Well, the gleeman is here, and none too soon.”

“Aye,” Cenn broke in, “but what of the fireworks? They cost near as much as the gleeman, and we’ve had no word at all from Fain.”

“Aye, that is unfortunate. But we can do nothing about that now, Cenn,” said Tam. “And what could we have done differently? It is not as if the peddler has ever been late for Bel Tine before.”

Cenn merely grumbled into his cup.

“Not that you asked,” came a woman’s voice from across the room near the kitchen door, “but I can tell you that the Circle’s preparations are going according to plan. So even if you fail to deliver the secret fireworks that everyone is already whispering about, Festival will still be festive, for true.”

Tam turned around to see Marin behind him, smiling and walking toward them with a plate stacked with honeycakes. Marin al' Vere was the best cook in Emond's Field, and everyone knew it. Tam's mouth watered from the smell alone.

"Would you good men like a snack," she asked, "to help you through the meeting?"

The eight men all turned their chairs away from the fire to welcome the honeycakes to the circle. The plate started at the far side of the group with Kevrim, which meant that his honeycake was just crumbs in his beard by the time the plate reached Tam. No matter. The cakes were still piping hot when it did. Tam took two, taking half of the first one in one large bite. It had a thin, crunchy outer layer and was moist and steaming on the inside. Delicious. Tam grabbed his mug of cider and took a pull.

"Thank you, dear," said Bran. "Just the thing."

Murmurs of assent rippled through the men, all with their mouths full of honeycake.

"Of course," replied Marin. "Let me know if—"

The muffled sound of shouts came from outside, to the front of the inn. Everyone turned in the direction of the shouting, expecting trouble. Jon Thane and Haral Luhhan stood and took a step toward the front door. Then came the sound of shrieking laughter and the clatter of hoof beats on the Wagon Bridge and the sound of dozens of pots and pans clanging together.

Tam smiled. It was not trouble. It was the peddler.

He let out a short laugh and stood up. Everyone else stood, too, and started walking toward the door, eager to greet the peddler.

Bran was to the door first. He was twice as wide as anyone else in the village but stepped with the light quickness of a dancing girl. When he opened the door, the sound of the wagon and the crowd surrounding it

doubled in volume and density. One by one, the members of the Village Council stepped out into the cold day.

The peddler reined his horses to a stop in front of the eight Councilmen as they reached the bottom of the short stairway leading up to the inn's wrap-around porch. A noisy cloud of villagers had already formed, and more streamed in from every direction. The wagon was large, with wheels taller than any of the people looking up at the wagon seat. There sat Padan Fain, his shoulder-length hair stark white despite being of an age with Tam and Bran. His warm hazel eyes seemed to sparkle as he looked out at the crowd around him.

Fain was quick with a laugh and quicker with a smile, always looking as if he knew a joke that nobody else did. That look could seem jolly and warm one moment and mischievous, or even mean, the next. He was handsome even with a massive beak of a nose and an old scar down his left cheek. He was a mystery Tam had never quite figured out in the score of years or more he had been visiting Emond's Field.

With Fain's wagon stopped, Bran and Tam led the rest of the Village Council forward, easy and deliberate despite the frenzy around them. The crowd parted reluctantly to let them pass, everyone closing in quickly behind them as they walked up to the foot of the wagon. Even while making way for the Village Council, the crowd never even paused in calling out for pins or lace or books or a dozen other things. Most of all, the villagers called out for news.

It was the same with every peddler who passed through. For the people in Emond's Field, needles and tea and the like were no more than half the freight in a wagon like Fain's. Every bit as important was word of outside, news of the world beyond the Two Rivers. People in Emond's Field did not care to travel, rarely going as far as the next town. A peddler's news was all the adventure they got, and usually all they wanted or needed.

Some peddlers simply told what they knew, throwing it all 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 and without grace. Not Fain. Fain spoke freely— if often teasingly— and spun out the telling, making a show to rival a gleeman. He enjoyed bringing the world to those who would never see it for themselves, enjoyed being the one to entrance and enthrall and excite. *I wonder how Fain will like finding a real gleeman in town. A bit jealous, I would wager.*

Fain paid little attention to the villagers as he fussed with tying his reins off just so, and no more to the Council. He acted as though he didn't see or hear the crowd. The demands for him to speak grew louder, but still he ignored them, fiddling with small tasks about the driver's seat and on the side of the wagon. Among the villagers, only the Council kept silent.

To his right Tam spotted Rand. He stood to the side of the crowd with his arms crossed, alone. *Oh, lad. If I knew how to make it easier, I would.* Tam sighed and looked back at Fain, who was scanning the crowd from atop the wagon seat. His show of indifference was over; his smile grew as the crowd quieted, seeing that he was on the verge of beginning. A few scattered cries — “What spices have you?” or “Is it true you've brought fireworks?” — were the last remnants of the uproar, until one last cry for news ended it altogether. The crowd was silent, all eyes on Fain.

“It's news you want, eh?” Fain began. His smile faded and his face took on a serious cast. “News of the world outside. Well. Outside is much like here, I imagine. You are thinking you have had troubles in the Two Rivers? Well, all the world has troubles, from the Great Blight south to the Sea of Storms, from the Aryth Ocean to the Aiel Waste. And even beyond. The winter was harsher than you've ever seen before, cold enough to jell your blood and crack your bones? Ah! Winter was cold and harsh everywhere. In the Borderlands they'd call your winter spring and dance bare chested in the street. 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 find, 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.”

Fain paused as the crowd again began to murmur. *Only one thing could make such troubles seem small.* Tam turned to Bran and said, “This story will not end well.” Bran raised a questioning eyebrow but said nothing.

Cenn Buie’s cracked voice rose above the crowd. “What could be worse than wolves killing sheep, and men?” Others muttered in support.

Tam just shook his head. *He has not even spoken his news and already it feels old, old and heavy like this winter. How much more so must it feel to Fain?* But the crowd had not yet guessed Fain’s meaning and cried out for him to continue.

“Men killing men,” he said. “It’s war I mean.” The crowd grew louder for a moment, then fell to near silence. “There is war in Ghealdan, war and madness. The snows of the Dhallin Forest are red with the blood of men. Ravens fill the air, and you can’t hear your own thoughts for their cries. Armies march to Ghealdan. Nations— great houses and great men— send their soldiers to fight.”

“War?” Bran’s mouth fit awkwardly around the unfamiliar word. No one in the Two Rivers had ever had anything to do with a war. *Well, almost no one.* “Why are they having a war?”

Fain grinned grimly at the Mayor and leaned forward as if about to tell a secret. But he spoke in a whisper meant to carry, and it did. “The standard of the Dragon has been raised. Men flock to oppose, and to support.”

One long gasp left every throat together. Even Tam, who had guessed at the fact of the war, shivered at hearing its cause.

“The Dragon!” someone moaned. “The Dark One’s loose in Ghealdan!”

“The Dragon ain’t the Dark One,” growled Haral Luhhan to Tam’s left. “And this is a false Dragon, anyway, just like those other two. A copycat.”

“Let’s hear what Master Fain has to say,” Bran said, but the crowd would not be quieted so easily. People cried out from every side, men and women

shouting over one another. Tam could not make out what they were saying. *A false Dragon. Haral is right. This is the third in, what, five years now? six?* Tam realized his short, farmer's fingernails were on the verge of breaking the skin of his palms. He unclenched his fists. *The flame.* He took one deep breath. Two. Three. *The void.* Tam felt as solid as the earth below him. He returned his attention to the crowd and the peddler. *Just another false Dragon. He must be.*

The crowd started churning around the wagon. Tam looked for the boys but did not see them. The cries grew louder and more frightened. He turned to Bran. "We have to stop this. The longer this goes, the harder it will be to restore calm and reason."

Bran nodded and raised his chin, shouting so even the people on the other side of the wagon could hear him clearly. "Stop this! 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 quiet, but Cenn refused to hold back.

"Tell us, Fain— *is* this a false Dragon?" he asked. "Or has Lews Therin returned?"

Bran blinked, stunned speechless for a moment before he snapped, "Don't be an old fool, Cenn!" But the question had kindled the crowd again, and Bran had no chance at quieting it this time. Some of the villagers were cursing Cenn for suggesting that the Dragon might indeed have been reborn, as if Cenn's words could make it so. Some were seconding his question and crying out in fear and anguish to think they might see the Dragon break the world again. Some just stammered, or stared vacantly toward Cenn, their silent mouths hanging half open. Whatever their reaction, they all seemed focused on Cenn now. The crowd was his.

The old thatcher looked around, eyes hot and chin high. *He looks ready for a war himself. We will see his stubborn streak now, I do not doubt.* Cenn raised his voice as he tried to stare down the glowers. "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 past?" Angry shouts commanded 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 highwayman comes to cut my throat. So speak it out plain, peddler. What have you heard? Eh? Is this man a false Dragon?"

If Fain was bothered by the news he brought or the upset he had caused, he gave no sign of it. He just ran his fingers through his white hair and said, "As to that, now, who can say until it is over and done?" He paused with one of his secretive grins. *Can he enjoy the telling even of bad news?* "I do know," he continued, "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."

The villagers fell silent once more, shock and fear plain in their eyes. Tam found Rand again and the two exchanged uneasy frowns across the crowd. Tam nodded to his son and then turned to Bran and drew him close, but before he could speak Ewin Finngar burst out.

"He'll go mad and die!" the boy said. "Only women can touch the Power. Doesn't he know that?"

"The Power!" someone else wailed. "Who will stop him now?"

Fain laughed a joyless laugh from atop the wagon. "Who do you think is going to stop him? The only people who can. A party of Aes Sedai has ridden south from Tar Valon."

"*That's enough!*" came a voice from the far end of the crowd. Tam couldn't see who spoke, but he recognized the voice. Nynaeve. The crowd parted for her as it had for the Council, and soon she was not two paces from Tam and Bran. Nynaeve was far more imposing than you would expect from someone so short and slender. She barely came to Tam's shoulder and could not have weighed more than seven stone. But with her eyes sharp and steady, and as dark as the braid hanging over her shoulder, she was not one to cross lightly. "False Dragons? The One Power? Aes Sedai? This is a

decent village of decent folk. You men of the Council— how could you let this happen under your own noses? Speaking of such things— has the winter not been hard enough without doing everything in your limited power to bring the eye of the Dark One to Emond's Field? I've only just arrived and I've heard enough. Councilmen, back into the Winespring Inn. Peddler, you'll join them. As will I."

Bran stepped forward with a red face and a puffed-out chest. Tam reached a hand out and touched his friend's shoulder. Bran turned his head and paused. Tam ducked to his ear. "She may be wrong, but she is right, my friend. We should take this behind closed doors. Put ourselves between Fain and our folk— and, more importantly, between Fain's *news* and our folk."

Bran set his jaw and Tam could feel his arm tense. *Is he steeling himself to surrender, or to do battle?* Bran turned his head back toward the crowd and said, "Wisdom, do not presume to order the Village Council about. I have yet to see, hear, or smell anything that cannot be talked about, or that the people of this village cannot handle."

Nynaeve began forward with a sneer and a scowl. Tam had always admired her willingness to fight for her beliefs and her dignity. Such courage was important for everyone, but especially for a Wisdom— and even more so for one as young as Nynaeve al'Meara. At times like this, though, it often seemed more like a blind hunger for confrontation than a strong-willed loyalty to principle. The Wisdom could be trying, to say the least.

Bran went on before Nynaeve could interrupt, addressing the entire crowd now instead of just her. "Good Master Fain has told us more than we bargained for. This news of war and the false Dragon and Aes Sedai is no mere matter of interest. It may have profound impacts on Emond's Field and the Two Rivers. The Village Council will need to ask Master Fain some questions and discuss what his news means for our village. Master Fain, would you be so kind as to come with us to the warm common room of my inn?"

Fain pursed his lips as he looked at Bran and then around at the crowd. *He does not look well pleased. Perhaps he mourns the loss of his audience.*

“Very well, Master Mayor. I will be of all the assistance I can be.”

“You cannot be serious!” Apparently Nynaeve had held her tongue for as long as she could. “If you—”

“Wisdom,” Bran said in an even voice, “perhaps you would join us, too?”

Nynaeve stood dumbstruck for a moment before storming past the peddler’s wagon, through the Village Council, and into the inn. Tam looked at Bran and shrugged. The two men turned to follow her.

“When is the last time you sat in on a Women’s Circle meeting, Master Mayor,” Tam asked softly.

“I still await my first invitation,” said Bran.

Tam barked a short laugh as they walked through the front door. It seemed the Wisdom could attend Village Council meetings after all.

The Gleeman

Mat had never seen her like before. Her dress was strange, and her jewelry. Even her eyes looked alien to him. At times they seemed to lock with his own, and he could swear she saw him better than even his own ma did. Other times she seemed to be altogether unaware of him, and of his eyes on her. On her and that flame.

That flame was strangest of all. It didn't look to be consuming anything, no wood or dung or bone. It hovered in the air just above the woman's palm, but she didn't look like she felt any heat at all. Serene. *What kind of woman is this? What kind of place stamps her face on its coins?* He twirled the round piece of silver with his fingers. *Will I ever see a place like that?*

"She really is something, Rand," Perrin said, breaking in on Mat's thoughts. "Wait till you meet her. A lady for true."

"She must be if she's giving out that kind of silver."

Mat shoved his coin back in his pocket, then brushed his hair out of his face. It was getting long.

"Do you think—" he began. "It can't just be a coincidence, can it? I mean, not with so many things at once."

"Aye," Perrin said. "This winter's been hard enough to believe by itself. Now you add news of war, and a flood of strangers— a highborn lady doling out coin, and a swordsman in her service, and most of all..." he paused and lowered his voice to a whisper, though no one was near them as they sat on

the porch at the northwest corner of the inn. “Most of all the rider. The black rider. Well, all that together... ain’t sure as I can swallow it all.”

Telling al’ Thor about the horseman had not been easy. It was hard enough for Mat to admit to himself what he had seen, or to Perrin, but he had always felt a bit uneasy around Rand al’ Thor. The Westwood lad seemed to prefer solitude to friendship and scowling to laughter. But the telling of it was nothing next to the hearing. *The rider is still in town. Al’ Thor saw him just today.* Mat wasn’t surprised, exactly, but that didn’t stop the headache or nausea. *Still here, and who knows when he’ll leave?* The silence between them stretched longer and longer. Mat felt as if he were caught in the rider’s gaze again. He shook himself free and looked up at the others.

“And,” he started, then stopped. This part was as bad as the rider, maybe worse. “And the false Dragon. Don’t forget that. I mean, burn me, but we’d just as well face the Dark One itself.”

Al’ Thor leaned back on his elbows. “Only a fool believes such things,” he said.

“As what, false Dragons or the Dark One?” asked Perrin with a disbelieving squint to his eye.

“Well, I credit Master Fain well enough that there’s a man out there claims he’s Lews Therin come back again,” al’ Thor answered, “and that two more have done the same these past few years. So that’s for that. But I’ve never seen actual sign of the Dark One or his minions. Neither have you. Neither has anyone you’ve ever met, nor anyone *they’ve* met. Those ghost stories don’t even hold water. They may be fit to scare little kids into doing their chores and minding their parents. Me, I’ve seen sixteen summers. Show me something real— like that horseman— and I’ll judge it fearsome or not. But stories?”

Al’ Thor leaned his head back and let it hang behind him. Mat just stared at him, mouth wide open. Only Rand al’ Thor, with his red hair and outlander ma and everything else odd about him, would say something so perfectly mad. Perrin whispered under his breath: *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.

It was a mantra every small child learned. Mat had never thought much about the meaning of the words, but they sounded different after al'Thor's surprising, unsettling speech. *How could the Dark One be bound at the instant of Creation and for all time? Was it never unbound, not even for a moment? Did the Creator create the Dark One just to have it trapped in Shayol Ghul?* Mat felt like a curtain was slowly lifting and a blinding light was beginning to pour into a dark room in his mind, a room that hadn't seemed dark until now. *Why would the Creator do that?*

He swallowed. *It makes no sense.*

Half of him wanted to talk about this more, and half wanted to never speak of it again. Aloud he said, "What of this war? What if it comes to the Two Rivers?"

"Men killing men," Perrin said. "It hardly seems possible."

Mat looked at the others and thought about the rider they had all seen. *What if he's a fugitive from this war? Maybe he's a part of it. He surely doesn't have peace on his mind.* Perrin caught Mat's eye and turned away.

"If it is war, it means no one any good," said al'Thor. "The Two Rivers should steer clear of it, any way we can."

They heard the inn's front door close behind them and looked up to see that Tam al'Thor had stepped out. "Aye, that's the way the Council sees it, too."

Mat and Perrin were on their feet first, and the younger al'Thor just a hair behind them.

"Father," he said. "What did Master Fain say? What of the false Dragon?"

"What about the Aes Sedai?" Mat added.

Master al'Thor shook his head slowly. "Padan Fain knew little more than he had already told. At least, little of interest to us. Battles won or lost. Cities taken and retaken. At least it hasn't spread, or had not the last Master Fain knew."

"Battles interest *me*," Mat said.

"What did he say about them?" asked Perrin.

"You are young, Matrim. I am too old to care much for battles," said Master al'Thor. "The only thing I care to know about them is that they are far off enough that we should not have to worry. That is what the Council thinks after talking with our friend, the peddler. The Aes Sedai have no reason 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."

Well, that was true enough. No one entered the Two Rivers except from the north, by way of Taren Ferry. The Caladaice Range blocked the west, and the Mire blocked the east. The White River bordered the Two Rivers to the south, and few had ever crossed its swift and rocky waters. Beyond the White, the Forest of Shadows ran on for a hundred miles or more without a road or a village. *No people, but plenty of wolves and bears.*

"So that's an end to it for us," Mat said. He was almost as disappointed as he was relieved. For a moment, it had seemed like something new and exciting was about to happen in Emond's Field. *I should have known better.*

"Not quite," said Master al'Thor. "Day after tomorrow we'll send men to Deven Ride and Watch Hill, and Taren Ferry, too, to arrange for a vigil to be kept. Riders along the White and the Taren, both, and patrols between. We should send them today, but the rest of the Council 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.

Master al'Thor shook his head. "I said *should* not have to worry, boy, not *did* not. Mistaking one for the other can kill a man, or worse. Besides, even

if the fighting doesn't reach us, it's bound to stir up some who will. Most will just be trying to find safety, but others will be looking to profit from the confusion. We'll offer any of the first type a helping hand, but we must be ready to send the second on their way."

"Can we be part of it?" Mat broke in. "I want to, anyway. You know I can ride as well as anyone in the village, Master al' Thor."

"You want a few weeks of cold, boredom, and sleeping rough?" Master al' Thor chuckled. "That's all that's likely to come of this. I hope that's all, anyway. 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."

Al' Thor had taken to staring into one of the inn windows, but he turned sharply toward his da when he heard that. "But Father, I thought we were staying for Winternight."

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

"Well, even so, we don't have to leave for hours yet. It's Winternight! And, and, I still haven't seen, that is—"

"We are going now," Master al' Thor replied in a tone that brooked no argument. In a softer voice he added, "You'll have plenty of time with your friends tomorrow." He smiled warmly at Mat and Perrin. "And for Festival, too. Five minutes, now, then meet me in the stable."

As soon as Master al' Thor took his leave, Mat spun toward Perrin.

"A watch!" He could hardly contain himself. "You have to come with. I'll bet the Two Rivers has never seen the like. If we get up to the Taren, we might even see soldiers. Or Tinkers even!"

"I don't know," Perrin said slowly. "This seems like something best left to the Village Council. If they think we should go, they'll let us know. And

myself, I've no great desire to see soldiers. I prefer the hammer to the sword. Rand, what do you think?"

"I think I get the short end, missing Winternight," said Rand. He looked about as if someone were late for a meet, then shrugged and spat.

"Bollocks. See you lot on the morrow, then."

"On the morrow," Mat said.

"Tomorrow, Rand," added Perrin, grabbing Rand's shoulder.

Al' Thor stared blankly at Perrin for a moment, nodded, then walked off toward the stable. Perrin turned and leaned forward against the porch's railing, looking out over the dusky Green.

"I don't know why you keep trying," Mat said, sliding next to Perrin at the rail. "If he wanted to be mates, we would be mates."

"Eh, he ain't near so bad as you make him out to be. Must be hard, living so far away from everyone."

Mat grunted. Perrin could always put himself in someone else's shoes. It was a gift Mat neither shared nor particularly envied. The silence stretched awhile before Mat broke it again.

"Perrin, I trust the Village Council as much as anyone, but how can they know what's best if they don't even know what they're looking for? We might be the only three people in town what's seen that black rider. Burn me if we shouldn't be in those patrols."

"Hmm. You may be right," said Perrin. He paused thoughtfully. "That would be a first."

"A laugh riot, you are."

"A laugh riot?" came a girl's voice from behind them, in the direction of the front door. They looked over their shoulders and saw Egwene al' Vere

leaning out the door, her hand on the handle and a grin on her face. “Hardly how I’d describe either of you.”

Mat turned all the way around and leaned back with his elbows on the railing. “Egwene al’ Vere,” he said with a smile. “Shouldn’t you be in bed? How late do your parents let you stay up these days?”

Egwene grinned back. “I’m a woman grown, Matrim Cauthon. I set my own bedtime.”

She twisted around as if looking back into the inn, then turned back toward Mat and Perrin. Mat felt his grin falter. *When did Egwene get her hair braided?* He looked at Perrin, hoping for some sort of explanation. His friend just shrugged and smiled. Mat shook his head, stunned, and almost missed Egwene’s question.

“What?” he said. “Oh, he was. He and his da went back to the farm already. Said they’d be back tomorrow though.”

“Tomorrow,” she said. She frowned for a second before smiling again. “Then he won’t get to enjoy the hot tea and honeycakes my mother just invited you boys in for. You know, if you’re not busy.”

That brought Mat’s smile back. The Winespring Inn’s hot fire, with Egwene’s ma’s honeycakes and tea— if he had tried to, he couldn’t have come up with a better way to spend the hour or so until Winternight festivities began. He turned to Perrin, but he was already half a step toward the door. Mat pushed off of the railing and took a couple of long strides to pull even.

“Sounds just choice,” Perrin said. Mat nodded his agreement.

They walked past Egwene, still holding the door open, and entered the inn’s common room. It was mostly empty. They saw no sign of Padan Fain, and Master al’ Thor was not the only Village Councilman to have already left. Mat supposed the others must have gone through the back door, since he hadn’t seen or heard them leave. Masters al’ Vere and Buie remained,

speaking in hushed tones in front of the big hearth. Samel Crowe and Jon Ayellin were also there, chatting near the back door but making no moves to leave by it. Of the Wisdom there was not a trace. Egwene disappeared quickly to the kitchen, leaving Mat and Perrin alone in the large room with half the Village Council. *Then again, maybe this ain't the best way to wait for Winternight to begin in earnest.*

But soon enough Mistress al' Vere emerged from the kitchen with two heaping plates of honeycakes and a big pot of tea. Egwene trailed behind her with mugs and small plates, and helped her ma set the table. As Egwene handed out honeycakes, Mistress al' Vere gently but firmly scooted Mat and Perrin toward the table on the left, never saying a word. Once they were seated and served, she turned toward her husband and old Cenn Buie and said, "That's enough business, you two. And you, Sam. Jon. Come relax by the fire and get ready for Winternight. Tonight we leave our worries behind for a little while. Come, come."

Mat grinned as the Mayor seemed to consider which would be greater: his own displeasure should he have to interrupt his conversation, or his wife's displeasure should he ignore her directive to sit and relax. It did not take him long to choose to sit down at the table on the right, where Cenn Buie was already seated. *I suppose even the Mayor must answer to someone.* As soon as Masters Crowe and Ayellin joined them, Mistress al' Vere turned around and walked back to the kitchen.

Egwene sat down across from Mat and Perrin and helped herself to a honeycake and some tea, munching contentedly and ignoring the two boys altogether. Perrin looked at Mat and shrugged. Mat just smiled and popped one of his honeycakes into his mouth whole, then reached for tea to wash it down.

It felt strange to be on the verge of Bel Tine, the eating and dancing and games of Festival, when the whole world seemed in such peril. As he took small, distracted bites from a second honeycake, Mat thought of the false Dragon, calling men to war. He thought of the glory of the battlefield, of heroes rising above the ordinary soldiers to perform feats of honor and

bravery, feats to be remembered in the minstrels' songs and gleemen's stories. And again and again, his thoughts turned to the black rider, imagining him a refugee, a former lieutenant in the false Dragon's army, driven to flee and passing through the Two Rivers. Perhaps he, too, could touch the One Power. Perhaps it was the abomination of the Power that made him so dreadful to see, so gripping and fearsome and foul. *Is he the first sign of the war reaching out to touch us here in the Two Rivers? Will we be swept up in the storm of the false Dragon? Is this how I will finally get a taste of adventure? A bittersweet taste, should it come courtesy of war.*

"That tea looks delicious," said a deep, sonorous voice, "but to whom would this old man speak about getting a nice mug of ale?"

Mat turned around, as did everyone else sitting down— Perrin and Egwene at his table, the Village Councilmen at the other. At the foot of the stairs leading up to the guest rooms stood a lean, white-haired man who would have been tall if not for a stoop to his shoulders. Stoop or not, he walked toward the hearth with a spryness that belied his apparent age. His cloak seemed a mass of patches, in odd shapes and sizes, fluttering even in the stillness of the common room. It was really quite thick, with the patches merely sewn on like decorations.

"The gleeman!" Egwene whispered excitedly.

"Indeed it is, young miss," he answered. "And you must be the innkeepers' daughter. Your lovely face is the mirror of your mother's, with your kind eyes and strong jaw."

Egwene blushed, and Mat let out a soft chuckle. A sharp glare from Egwene quieted him quickly.

"Master Gleeman," said Bran as he stood from his chair, "you are correct. This is my daughter, Egwene. Egwene, go get a mug of ale for the good man, please."

As Egwene hurried to the kitchen, the gleeman took a seat with Masters al' Vere and Buie.

“Ah, honeycakes,” he said, taking one from the large plate at the center of the table. “A personal favorite.” Mat guessed by the smile that broke out on his face as he took a bite that the gleeman was telling the truth.

“Now,” continued the gleeman, “what was that ruckus you had going on down here? I started to come down ten minutes ago, but I saw you lot arguing and thought it best to wait. I trust nothing is amiss with your festival plans.”

“No, no,” answered the Mayor, “nothing like that. A peddler just arrived in town and told us of this war in Ghealdan, you see. And a man claiming to be the Dragon Reborn. Another false Dragon! Now Aes Sedai are riding from Tar Valon. Well, the Village Council had to learn everything, see if we might be in danger here.”

“And the Wisdom, well, she had to have her say,” Master Buie said. He shared a look with Master al’Vere and added, “And so did I. The Wisdom and I agreed even less than usual today.”

“War in Ghealdan?” said the gleeman. “Old news, even in Baerlon, and that is the last place in the world to hear anything.” He paused, looking closely at the Mayor. When he spoke again, his voice was still deep, but now it was quieter and tinged with scorn. “A peddler, you say? Then that *was* Padan Fain’s voice I heard. He was always one to carry bad news quickly, and the worse, the faster. Fain is more raven than man.”

“Master Fain has come often to Emond’s Field, Master Gleeman.” Egwene had returned with a mug of ale, which she handed to the gleeman before sitting back down with Mat and Perrin. “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. “Thank you, my dear. Such a lovely lass. You should have rose buds in your hair. Sad to say, 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.”

Mat laughed before he could stop himself, and he heard Perrin choke a little on his honeycake. Egwene straightened up and spoke in a calm and formal tone.

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

“Thom Merrilin. My name is Thom Merrilin, not Master Gleeman.” The gleeman stood up and walked over to the fireplace as he lit his ornately carved long-stemmed pipe. He drew a few times and let out three large smoke rings. Mat could feel himself staring at the man’s eyes, bright blue under bushy white brows. *Everybody in the Two Rivers has dark eyes. Everyone except Rand al’Thor. Maybe al’Thor’s ma was from the same place as this man. Someplace where no one has dark eyes.*

The gleeman hitched his colorful cloak up on his shoulders. His voice seemed to reverberate throughout the large common room. “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 Egwene clapped and Mat murmured appreciatively. Even the four men at the other table looked impressed.

“Master— ah— Master Merrilin?” Mat was unsure exactly what form of address to take out of what the gleeman 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 before taking another long draw of his pipe. “I am a gleeman, not a newsmonger. And I make a point of never knowing anything about Aes Sedai. Much safer that way.”

“Aye,” said Master Buie, “sound advice, if you ask me.”

“But the war— ” Mat began eagerly, only to be cut off by the gleeman.

“In wars, boy, fools kill other fools for foolish causes. That’s enough for anyone to know. I am here for my art.” He thrust a finger at Perrin. “You, lad. You’re a big one. Not with your full growth on you yet, but I doubt there are many in the district as wide in the shoulder and thick in the chest. You’ll be the size of an ogier by the time you’re done. How are you called?”

“An ogier?” Perrin laughed. “Not unless I stand on my own shoulders. I’m just an ordinary boy, sir. I can’t compare to the made-up creatures from your stories. As for how I’m called, my name is Perrin Aybara.”

“Well, now. Made-up creatures from my stories. Is that what they are?” Thom Merrill looked at Perrin and Mat as he tugged at one of his mustaches. “You lads are widely traveled, then, it seems.”

“We’ve been as far as Watch Hill, and Deven Ride,” Perrin said quickly. “Not many around here have gone as far.”

“We’ve seen the Mire, too,” Mat added. “That’s the swamp at the far end of the Waterwood. *Nobody* goes there—it’s full of quicksands and bogs. Nobody except us. And the mountains—nobody goes to the Caladaice Range, either, but we did, once. To the foot of it, anyway.”

“As far as that?” the gleeman murmured, brushing at his mustaches and seeming to hide a smile.

“It’s bad luck to enter the mountains.” Mat felt defensive, but he wasn’t sure why. “Everybody knows that.”

Mat looked around for help, knowing he was starting to sound foolish. His cheeks flushed with embarrassment when he saw that a score of folk had wandered into the inn’s common room—no doubt looking to stay warm until the Winternight festivities began—and were now gathered around them. Luckily, the Mayor came to his rescue.

“Maybe these boys haven’t traveled as far as you, Master Merrill,” he said, “but what does Perrin’s size have to do with anything, ogier or no?”

“Just this, my good innkeeper. A little later I will let this strapping lad try to pick me up, but he won’t be able to lift my feet from the ground. Not him, nor his father, nor any other man.” He turned back to Mat and Perrin. “Now what do you think of that?”

Perrin snorted a laugh. “I think I can lift you right now.” But when he started to get out of his chair, the gleeman motioned him back.

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

No longer the focus of the conversation, Mat took a moment to look around at those who had gathered since the gleeman came downstairs. He saw men and women looking wide-eyed as children, and children with mouths hanging open as they peeked from behind the older onlookers. All looked as if they were waiting for the gleeman to perform a miracle. Mat saw him look the crowd over, too, appearing to count them in his head.

The white-haired man gave a slight shake of his head and sighed. “I suppose I had better give you a small sample. So you can run and tell the others, eh? Just a taste of what you will see tomorrow at your festival.”

He walked toward the center of the common room, then without notice leapt high into the air, twisting and somersaulting to land facing the crowd atop a table twenty feet from the hearth. He jumped forward, did one somersault and landed back on the floor, this time with three balls— red, white, and black— dancing between his hands even as he landed.

A soft sound came from the watchers, half astonishment, half satisfaction. Mat forgot all about his embarrassment. He flashed Egwene a grin and got the same in return. He traded friendly shoves of delight with Perrin, shoulder to shoulder, then returned his attention to the gleeman.

“You want stories?” the gleeman asked. “I have stories, and I will give them to you. I will make them come alive before your eyes.” A blue ball came from nowhere to join the others, 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. And Birgitte.”

Mat looked at her out of the corner of his eye, but she seemed intent on the gleeman. Those seemed odd stories for her to call for, stories about adventures and long journeys. In Mat’s experience, girls’ favorites were always the funny ones, or stories about women outwitting men who were supposed to be smarter than everyone else. Stories about Lenn and Birgitte, those were more Mat’s speed. Stories about life outside of the Two Rivers. Tales of adventures, to get a person dreaming.

“Old stories, those,” said the gleeman, and suddenly he was juggling three colored balls with each hand. “Stories from the Age before the Age of Legends, some say. Perhaps even older. Stories from the past, stories from the future. See, Ages come and go, and come again, and go again. Seven Ages to every turn of the Wheel, each time different, each time the same. Some say that each Age leaves memories that fade to legend, then to myth, and are forgotten by the time that Age comes again. But who is to say that some of my stories are not from the last time the Wheel wove this Age we live in? I have all stories— stories 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 the gleeman's hands in two intertwining circles. His voice was almost a chant. He turned slowly as he spoke, taking in the whole room but still seeming to speak directly to Mat. *Does everyone here feel the same? Is this part of the gleeman's magic?* "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 shadowspawn 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.* Or perhaps a tale from *The Great Hunt of the Horn.*"

All at once the balls seemed to vanish into the pockets and folds of his cloak. Commanding the attention of every person in the room, the gleeman began the tale of *The Bargain of Rogosh Eagle-eye*. From somewhere in his cloak he produced a small harp and started playing a lilting melody that seemed to weave in and out of the words of his story. Mat was enthralled. He gasped and laughed and leaned far forward in his chair as the gleeman spun his tale. He could feel Perrin to his right and Egwene to his left, both as enchanted as he was. It must have been an hour or more that Mat listened to Thom Merrillin's chant, traveled with him in armies across the Caralain Grass, sat with him in war council meetings, listened with him to the lovers' whispers between Rogosh and Dunsinin.

The gleeman's voice grew louder. *"The drums rumble as thunder, shaking the very ground beneath Blaes' feet. Her heralds announce that the hero has arrived, Rogosh Eagle-eye comes to do homage—"*

The flow of words and music stopped. Mat looked about, wondering what had interrupted the gleeman's tale. He saw for the first time that Lady Moiraine had joined the listeners. For a moment the gleeman looked at her sideways, his face and body still except for making the harp disappear into his ample coat sleeves. Then he bowed, holding his cloak wide. "Your pardon, but you are surely not from this district?"

“Lady!” Ewin Finngar hissed from the crowd. “The Lady Moiraine. Show the proper respect.”

“Shut it, Ewin,” Mat said in his loudest whisper. “Show some respect yourself.”

The gleeman blinked at the two of them, then bowed to Lady Moiraine again, more deeply. “Your pardon again... ah, Lady. I meant no offense.”

Lady Moiraine swept his concerns with a small wave of her hand. “I took none, 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.” She gave the gleeman a smile that Mat wished were meant for him.

“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.” He looked wary, and not at all pleased to find her there. Mat wondered what sort of entertainment a lady like her might be offered in a city like Baerlon, or Caemlyn. Surely it couldn’t be anything better than a gleeman.

“That is a matter of taste, Master Bard,” the lady replied. “Some stories I like, and some I do not.”

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

Lady Moiraine answered his bow with a gracious nod. For a moment she seemed even more the lady Ewin had named her, accepting an offering from one of her subjects. Then the man in her service, Lan, came bounding down the stairs and into the common room, sword out.

“Trollocs!” he yelled to the whole room before dashing out the front door.

Trollocs? This story has trollocs, too?

The next thing Mat saw, Lady Moiraine was running through the front door after Lan.

That’s when everything turned to madness.

Winternight in the Westwood

The sword in his hands made Tam feel like a younger man from another life, a life he had tried to leave buried and undisturbed. *If you had really wanted to leave it behind, you would have melted this blade down long ago.* He stood up, closed the old chest, and pushed it back under the bed. With his scabbard and sword belted around his waist, he grabbed the key from the drawer in his nightstand and walked out of his bedroom and down the stairs.

When he got downstairs, Tam opened the back door and stared out into the night forest, into the silence. *Nothing.* He took a deep breath and closed the door. He put the key in the lock and paused. *I think this is the first time I've ever locked this door. Either door, for that matter.* He turned the key and rejoined Rand in the den, wondering what his son would think of him holding a sword.

The stewpot over the fire had filled the room with a delicious, savory smell — mutton, onions, peppers and herbs, even some carrots. No one's stores were very rich this late in the season, but tomorrow was Festival and a special dinner was not too much to ask. Tam had lit more than a score of candles in hopes of lending the room some Winternight cheer, but he felt little at the moment. In his chest sat a gnawing doubt he couldn't escape, a doubt born of a long and bitter winter with war at its tail. *None of this feels right. None of it.*

Were it just his own uneasiness, he might have been able to set it aside. But his son seemed just as anxious. When Tam had explained why they were spending Winternight at home instead of in the village, Rand had agreed

without reservation. He had traded stories with Matrim and Perrin, and all had seen this mysterious black rider lurking about. Along with the reports Tam had heard in the Village Council meeting, that was at least five different boys who had seen the rider, and all thought he was up to mischief, or worse. Now the peddler brought news of war. *Another war.* With so much uncertainty, Tam thought it best they spend the night keeping watch over the farm. Rand said no more about missing Winternight; he may have grown disagreeable and distant these past few years, but he never slacked in his dedication to the farm.

Tam smiled at his son as he walked through the den to lock the front door. Rand was stretched out on the rug before the fire, engrossed in Tam's old copy of *The Travels of Jain Farstrider*. When he heard Tam turning the lock, Rand looked up with a question in his eyes.

"Best to be safe," Tam said over the half wall that created their small foyer. He twirled the key through his fingers as he walked back toward the fire. "Maybe I'm taking a fancy, or maybe the weather is blacking my mood, but —"

Tam walked out from behind the half wall; Rand saw the sword.

"Father!" Rand sprang to his feet and crossed the room in three long strides. "Where did that come from? Did you get it from a peddler? How much did it cost?"

Tam drew the weapon slowly, letting the firelight dance along its edge. Twenty years in that chest and it remained sharp and shining. Beautiful. It was likely the only sword in Emond's Field, and certainly the finest. Some of the merchants' guards who passed through the Two Rivers had swords, but they were plain. Tam's weapon had a quiet power and elegance, slightly curved and sharp along one edge. Bronze herons adorned the scabbard and the hilt; another was etched into the steel of the blade itself. *My herons.*

"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. It seemed

worth it at the time. Maybe she was right. Maybe I should have just given it away long ago.”

“Give it away?” Rand exclaimed. “How could you give away such a thing?”

Tam snorted. “Not much use in herding sheep, now is it? I can’t plow a field or harvest a crop with it.” For a long minute he stared at the sword, wondering how he came to hold 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, the next few days might see us glad I tucked it in that old chest, instead.” He slid the sword back into its scabbard. “The stew should be ready. I’ll dish it out while you fix the tea.”

Tam got bowls and spoons and served them their Winternight supper at the heavy oaken table at the front of the room. The table was too large, with enough room to seat ten or more. They hadn’t hosted so many since Kari died, but Tam was loath to replace it. Rand was setting down the tea when a heavy thump at the door rattled the lock. Tam turned back toward the door and met Rand’s uncertain gaze.

“One of the neighbors,” Rand said uncertainly. “Master Dautry wanting to borrow...” But the Dautry farm, their nearest neighbor, was half 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 took two steps toward the door with both hands resting on his sword hilt. “I don’t think—” he began, and the door burst open, pieces of the iron lock spinning across the floor.

In the doorway stood a figure unlike any Tam had ever seen. It was the size and shape of a man, but its skin was bone white and looked to be sloughing off. Where it was cracked, it showed grey flesh beneath. Its hair was white also, or perhaps a pale silver, and hung in long, flat strands as wide Tam’s thumb. Its face was vaguely human, but its crimson eyes had no visible whites, and its ears were not visible at all. Steel pins and hoops pierced its face in several places. Its heavy black mail hung to its knees, with spikes at

the wrists and elbows and shoulders. One hand clutched a heavy, scythe-like sword; the other hand was flung up before its eyes, shielding them from the light.

Tam had never seen anything like it, but it could be only one thing. *Trolloc*.

Tam heard Rand let out a terrified shout. As he turned to check on his son, the teakettle flew by him and hit the snarling creature directly in the face. The trolloc roared, part scream of pain, part inhuman snarl, as boiling water splashed over its head and neck. Even as the kettle struck, Tam ran toward the door and vaulted over the half wall, landing in front of the furious, half-blind creature. He drew his sword and saw the familiar glint as he whipped it around into fighting position and then forward at the trolloc's throat. The roar became a gurgle as blood as dark as pitch gushed down the thing's neck. The trolloc fell back, but another was clawing its way past before the first one hit the floor. Tam slashed twice quickly at its face and neck, and now two bodies blocked the door. He slammed the door so that it caught, the dead trollocs trapped between it and the half wall.

He turned back to Rand. Throwing the kettle had likely been an unthinking reflex, but now the boy stood frozen and terrified. "Run, lad!" he shouted. "Hide in the woods!" The bodies in the doorway jerked as others outside tried to pull them clear. "There are too many to hold! Out the back! Go! Go! I'll follow!"

Rand turned and ran toward the back door. Tam turned his attention back to the front, conjuring up the flame in his mind and wrapping himself in the void. He saw at least four trollocs fighting to get through the front door and the bodies blocking it. With no room for the slashing his sword was meant for, Tam stabbed around the obstacles at the current wave of trollocs. He heard some grunts of pain, but he could tell the wounds were not deadly. He would not be able to hold here for long. Soon they would push through the tangle and have him outnumbered at close quarters. As he backed into the den to take a more defensible position, he heard a crash and the sound of splintering wood come from the back of the house. "Rand!" he shouted.

When he turned to look, a trolloc in black iron chain mail was running down the rear hallway at him with two heavy blades that looked more suited to chopping down small trees than sword fighting. He saw no sign of Rand. Another trolloc made its way through the splintered doorway, this one with mismatched plate and a spear.

“They’re coming in the back!” That was Rand’s voice, sounding like it came through the side window. “I’m outside! Run, Father!” *Well done, lad.* A grim smile touched Tam’s lips as he ran to meet the two trollocs. *Flame and void.* The first sprang forward while the second leapt through the window after Rand’s voice, exploding through the glass and frame rather than take the time to climb through. Tam had to get to Rand. *Lightning of Three Prongs.* The sword forms came back almost effortlessly. *Badger in the Moonlight.* The trolloc with two swords collapsed to the floor, dropping its weapons as it grabbed at its knees in pain. Tam opened its throat. *Rand.*

Two more trollocs were standing in the doorway before Tam could get past the one dying on the floor. He beat a hasty retreat, getting back to the den just in time to see three more trollocs finally breaking through the tangle of the front door. *I’ve run out of doors.* Tam started running toward the three trollocs who had just made it inside. They bent their knees and raised their weapons, ready to kill Tam as soon as he got close enough. Instead, they watched him veer left, jump atop the table, and hurtle through the front window at full speed.

Tam twisted his ankle as he landed and fell to his knees. Behind him, he heard coarse shouts in a guttural, twisted, throaty tongue he did not understand. Ahead of him to his left, he heard the bleats of frightened sheep coming from the pen. None of these mattered. Tam stood up, tested the ankle, and then ran to the back of the house to find Rand.

He heard his pursuers coming through the window he had used. Then he heard something else.

“Father!” Rand’s voice. “I’m over here!” Coming from the barn. Not the back of the house. Which meant that the trollocs were now between them.

Tam did not break stride or turn back. He just veered slightly to his right, away from the house, and shouted, "Run, lad!" He gestured with his sword as if to someone ahead of him. "Hide!" *Come on, you monsters. All the action is back here.* When he was about ten paces past the back of the house, Tam checked over his shoulder. He saw about a dozen trollocs chasing him, and none moving toward the barn.

Tam broke sharply to the left, into the thick of the Westwood. The terrain here might seem uneven and treacherous, with trees and brush in unpredictable, irregular places, but to Tam this section of the wood was as familiar as the sheets of his own bed. He stopped before a large oak about thirty paces in and turned so that it protected his rear. The trollocs were already crashing through the forest, closing in on him.

Tam flowed through various sword forms as his attackers came first singly, then in twos and threes. *Unfolding the Fan. Death. Broken Ocean. Death. Cougar Uncoiled. Death.* Tam had laid five down when he faced three at once for the first time. He was on the defensive for what seemed like half an hour but in reality could not have been more than a minute or two. The middle one fell first; a deep gash across its belly left it bleeding out slowly on the forest floor. The one to Tam's left stayed on its feet longer but died more quickly, letting out wet gasps as it tried to hold in the blood pouring from right below its jaw.

But the trolloc on his right did not go down so easily. By the time Tam stood over its corpse, he was nursing wounds of his own. He had one superficial wound on his right shoulder and a deeper gash right above his left hip. He put his left hand over the gash. The blood was hot; the skin was hotter. The next pair of trollocs was almost on him.

Even with the oak at his back, Tam would be surrounded soon. He broke to his left, hoping to lead the trollocs farther away from Rand. He laid a false trail toward the mountain, then doubled back to weave an unpredictable and uneven path through the Westwood. Even slowed by his wounds, he could hear the sounds of pursuit fading behind him. Fading, but still audible. He picked an even more difficult path as he circled around the house

completely. When he came to the sheep pen, he heard no sign of trollocs at all.

Ahead of him he saw a figure crouched low, making its way from the barn to the forest. *Rand*. Tam wiped his sword on his trousers before sheathing it, then crept quietly but quickly behind his son. Rand's pace slowed until he was almost crawling. Tam was just a step behind him. It felt like a week since he had seen the boy. *Could it have been just half an hour ago?* To limit the sound of their reunion, Tam announced himself by clamping his hand hard over Rand's mouth from behind. He grabbed Rand's left wrist with his left hand. Rand clawed frantically with his right hand and strained to break free of the hand over his mouth.

"Don't break my neck, lad," Tam whispered.

Tam could feel Rand's muscles relax. He let go of his son, and the boy fell to his hands and knees, gasping as if he had run for miles. Tam dropped down beside him, leaning on one elbow.

"I should have remembered how strong you've grown these past few years before trying that," 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 dogs. Maybe better."

"But trollocs are just..." Rand's words trailed off. Tam gave a half-smile that Rand probably could not see in the dark. *Just what, lad? Just stories?* "Are you sure?" Rand whispered. "I mean... trollocs?"

"Aye, I'm sure. You know, lad, in hindsight, it may not have been the best idea to come back to the farm tonight." Tam gave a wry chuckle and coughed. "Trollocs in the Two Rivers. I've never seen one, not before tonight, but I've talked with men who have, so I know a little. Not too little, I hope. Listen closely. Trollocs are meant to see better than a man in the dark, but bright lights blind them, for a time at least. I think that's why they had trouble following us after being in the house. But even blind, they hear and smell better than we do, more like dogs than men. I don't know of any

weaknesses as such, but I hear they're lazy. If we can avoid them long enough, they may give up. I hope."

Tam felt a bit dizzy and fell back on both his elbows.

"In the stories they hate men," said Rand, "and serve the—the Dark One."

"That's more than I know either way, lad. But I hear tell they're bent on killing, and no less on raping and maiming, and don't care what order they do them in. That is plenty dark enough for me."

"Do you think they're still hunting for us?"

"Maybe, maybe not," Tam answered. His breath was ragged now. "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." He touched his left side and the heat nearly burned his fingers. "Best act as if they are, though."

"You're hurt."

"Keep your voice down. It's no more than a scratch, and we can do nothing for 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."

Tam closed his eyes. He knew he was lying still, but he felt as though he were spinning around and around. He opened his eyes again, but that did little to help. He felt Rand's cold hand against his cheek and closed his eyes again.

"You're on fire," Rand said. "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." Tam heard Rand scramble to his feet, then felt the boy trying to pull him up. Tam could barely stifle the groan with a desperate clenching of his teeth. Rand eased him back down.

“Yes, boy, let me rest awhile,” Tam said. “I’m tired.”

The dark started to dissolve into soft light and vague shapes. One in the foreground began to solidify, and to move toward him. *Kari. Alive.* Tam almost cried as his wife walked over to him and sat at his side. *Kari. I’ve done the best I could. He’s a good boy.* He felt a tugging there and looked down to find Rand taking his sword from its scabbard. He was in the Westwood. He was cut. *Kari. Alive.*

Rand started to stand, holding Tam’s sword. Tam caught his arm. “Where are you going?”

“We need the cart,” his son said. “And blankets.” He pulled Tam’s hand away from his sleeve. Tam tried to hold tight, but his fingers would not move. “Rest,” Rand said, “and I’ll be back.”

“Careful,” Tam breathed.

Rand was standing now, blotting out the stars with a shape even blacker than the night sky. “I will be.” Tam heard Rand’s first four or five footsteps, then nothing.

He closed his eyes again.

Bel Tine Morning

The scream tore through Egwene like fire through darkness, leaving her blinking and gasping for air. She lifted her head from her folded arms and looked around; she was sitting at a table in the common room of the Winespring Inn. *Home.*

She shook her head to clear the fog. She looked around for the screamer but the room was empty. She was alone. *A bad dream, and no surprise after last night.* Then she heard it again, louder and more shrill, and seemingly closer. *Outside.*

Egwene went to brush her hair from her face, then realized that it was still in a braid. She stood up and ran toward the back of the inn, where the noise was coming from. She was through the kitchen and out the back door before it occurred to her that she might find danger waiting for her there.

She didn't. By the time Egwene arrived, the danger had come and gone and left its mark. Marisa Ayellin lay atop the old, ruined foundation behind the inn, apparently unconscious. Nynaeve stood panting, straddled over Marisa and holding her right leg, one hand on her hip and one in the crook of her knee. She wiped the sweat from her forehead and looked up at Egwene.

"She dislocated her hip," Nynaeve said. "I gave her some tea to dull the pain and a wooden bit, but she still screamed and blacked out when I put it back in place. Not that I blame her."

Egwene looked more closely at Marisa as she walked over, squinting in the predawn half-light. Half her hair was pulled out of her braid, and her dress was torn at the neck and down the right sleeve. The wooden bit was on

Marisa's left shoulder, a thick string of spittle still hanging between it and her mouth. She had a cut, long but not deep, across her forehead, and some scrapes on her arms and legs, but the hip seemed her only serious injury to Egwene. Others had not been so lucky.

Nynaeve stepped around Marisa. "Did you get some rest?"

"Yes, a bit. I fell asleep in the common room. It looked like you got everyone else who was hurt either into rooms upstairs or back to their homes, no?"

"For the most part." Nynaeve took a deep breath, slumped her shoulders, and stretched her neck from side to side. She looked exhausted, with dark circles under her eyes, and her face and dress were well covered in soot and dirt. *I likely look the same. I surely feel it.* "Not everyone had a home left to go to, and the inn has only so many rooms. We had to put some folks up in Mistress Calder's house, just for now."

"And you? Did you sleep at all?" Egwene asked.

"No, no sleep. But plenty of nightmares." Nynaeve looked at Egwene. "Can that have been real? Any of it?"

"I think Marisa would say yes."

They both looked out at the Green and the village beyond the Winespring Water. Half the houses were at least partially burned; some were no more than piles of charred rubble. Blackened brick chimneys thrust like dirty fingers from heaps of ash and cinders. *It will be weeks before we lose the smell of smoke. It's in the air, in our clothes, in our skin.* A handful of villagers were already up and about, or maybe they had never turned in. They wandered to and fro, their faces streaked with soot and grime, poking through the ashes, looking for any trifle to salvage. What little had been rescued from the flames dotted the streets; tall mirrors and polished sideboards and chests of drawers stood in the dust like lonely sentries, overlooking meager piles of bedding, cooking utensils, and clothing.

It was surreal to see the village— so familiar, so unchanging— transformed overnight. As fantastic as the ruined houses were, so were the houses that stood untouched. The night's destruction seemed scattered at random throughout Emond's Field. Five houses marched untouched in one row, while in another place a lone survivor stood surrounded by desolation.

The Green itself was barely recognizable. What little grass had dotted it the day before was gone now, burned to ash. The earth was rent and scorched. *That wasn't the trollocs. That was the lightning.*

They heard some shouts from the other side of the inn and went around the corner to see what the commotion was. Some men were working to light the Bel Tine bonfires. *Festival fires? Today?* But when she looked closer, Egwene saw that they were not lighting the fires for Festival. They were lighting them to burn the bodies. The trolloc bodies. The villagers who had died last night— luckily only a handful, not more than a dozen— would get proper goodbyes, individual pyres and ceremonies. But not the scores of trollocs. More shouts, and they saw some men dragging arms and legs and torsos toward the piles of wood and trolloc flesh.

Egwene turned her head and gagged. Nynaeve put an arm around shoulders and walked her back to Marisa.

"This was that woman," Nynaeve said, seething. "That woman and her man. They arrive and we are attacked not a day later. 'Strangers are like ravens; they rarely mean good.' Those beasts are of *her* world, and she led them into *ours*. I would have her hide if I could. I will tell your father the same. He cannot allow them to stay. *Cannot.*"

Egwene had regained her composure but remained silent. She considered Nynaeve a friend, even if she held the title of Wisdom, and she did not want to get involved in any disputes she had with Papa. That was Mayor-Wisdom business, and none of hers.

"What now?" Egwene asked, hoping the Wisdom could offer some guidance in a world so different from the one she had walked in the day before.

“Now we check on those we know were hurt last night, and find out if anyone else needs our aid. I say ‘we’ because I hope you will join me. If you are serious about considering a life as a Wisdom, you will never get a better chance to see how difficult it can be— both to help, and to know when you cannot. You know I think you have talent, and I could use some help today.”

Egwene blushed a little. She hadn’t even told Mama that she was thinking about becoming a Wisdom. She was not sure she wanted to— for one thing, the life of a Wisdom seemed a good deal lonelier than the one she wanted for herself— but it offered a sure path to the outside world. Nynaeve was only eight years her senior and would be Wisdom here for a long time. But other villages, ones she had never been to or even heard of, were always looking for good Wisdoms. Nynaeve said that the villages north of the Taren always chose a Wisdom from elsewhere, so she wouldn’t have any favorites among the village folk. And she said that Egwene had a talent, that she could learn to listen to the wind. Not all Wisdoms could do that, even if they said they could.

“Yes, of course I’ll help.”

The next few hours were a blur. While the rest of the village shook free of its fitful sleep and set about cleaning up, Egwene and Nynaeve went from house to house, checking on people with smoke poisoning and wounds from trolloc blades, with broken bones and sprained ankles and knees and wrists. Some had fallen defending their homes and some had fallen trying to flee. Nynaeve helped them all. She was incredible to watch. She always knew which herbs could help, or how to wrap and brace an injury, or when the only medicines were rest and time.

Egwene learned a lot by watching, and even more the handful of times that Nynaeve let her help. She wanted to watch everything the Wisdom did, to soak it all in, but sometimes Nynaeve had her run off to fetch things or deliver a message to someone. She didn’t mind; making sure Nynaeve had what she needed was more important than getting a chance to watch and learn. During their second visit to the Calder house, Nynaeve sent Egwene

to the inn to fetch as many bed sheets as she could carry, cut into bandages. She had cut up eight sheets and wrapped the strips in a ninth, along with Mama's scissors so she could cut that one up, too, once she got back to Nynaeve. She was at the end of the footbridge, walking as fast as she could with her load slung over her shoulder, when she heard a man's voice off to her left.

"Egwene! Egwene!"

She turned and saw Haral Luhhan waving her over. *What could he want?* Egwene looked at the blacksmith but didn't slow as she continued toward the Calder house. Then she saw Rand.

"Oh no." She dropped her load of bandages and ran over to Master Luhhan and Rand. Rand looked as if he had run through a bramble patch, his clothes torn and dirty. He was dragging a makeshift litter made from hastily chopped wood and some torn blankets. Tam al'Thor, Rand's father, lay on top. He looked unconscious, and pale, and drenched in sweat. "What happened? Your father, is he... how... are you alright?"

Rand didn't respond. He stared off in the distance, seeming not to recognize her at all. Egwene reached her hand up and touched his cheek, gently drawing his gaze toward her. When he finally looked her in the eye, she could see the tears start to well up, could see the quiver start in his lip. *He's exhausted. It's all he can do just to keep himself from collapsing.*

"Rand, you need to breathe," she said. "You can't help him unless you're calm. Breathe." She ran her fingers behind Rand's neck, closed her eyes, and bent him down to her, touching her forehead to his. She put her hand flat against his chest and they just stood together for a moment in silence. When she felt his breathing slow down, she kissed him lightly on the forehead. It was all she dared here in the open, next to Master Luhhan no less.

"Your hair," he said in a whisper. "Your hair is..."

“Come,” she said softly. “I’ll take you to the Wisdom. She will know what to do.”

Rand seemed calmer, if still distant. Egwene started walking toward the Calder house, then stopped to make sure Rand was following. Master Luhhan had picked up the back of the litter and was nudging Rand forward. Rand started walking and Egwene turned back around. It was not far to the Calder house, but she stopped often to make sure they were keeping pace with her.

When they got to the front of the house, Egwene turned and said, “Wait here. I— ”

“Gwennie, that— that’s Mat’s house.”

Well, it used to be. Mat’s house stood on one side of Mistress Calder’s house and Berin Thane’s on the other. Both were no more than piles of ash and char on top of foundation stones.

“He’s fine. They all are. They were at the inn when the trouble started.” She wasn’t sure he heard her at all. “I have to go get Nynaeve. Stay here.”

She went as quickly as she could, and fair dragged Nynaeve out of the house. When they stepped outside, Master Luhhan was gone, probably to rejoin the cleanup effort. Rand was alone, kneeling beside his father and speaking too softly for Egwene to hear. When he saw them, he lurched to his feet and stumbled a few steps forward.

Nynaeve dropped to her knees beside the litter. The Wisdom didn’t give Rand so much as a glance; Egwene could not take her eyes off of him. Now that he wasn’t holding the litter, she got a good look at just how poorly the night had treated him. He must have had a cut somewhere around his right ear because the entire area was caked with dried blood. His cloak was torn in several places. His left pant leg looked nearly shredded, and she could see wounds beneath that were already starting to scab. At his left hip hung what could only be a sword, though where he had gotten it was beyond

Egwene. *One thing at a time. First take care of his father, then we can take care of him.*

Egwene returned her attention to Nynaeve. The Wisdom felt Master al'Thor's face and thumbed open his eyelids. Rand looked on worriedly. Egwene did not know how to comfort him. Secrecy seemed like a trifle with Master al'Thor looking half-dead, but revealing their dalliance could only be a distraction or worse for Rand now. If Mama were to see...

Egwene walked over to Rand and put her hand on his back. Together they watched Nynaeve remove a bandage that Rand must have wrapped around his father's belly. Egwene stretched her neck, but Nynaeve replaced the wadded cloth before she could get a look at the wound. Sighing, Nynaeve smoothed the blanket and gently pulled Master al'Thor's cloak back up to his neck. She looked almost as if she were 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."

Egwene looked at Rand, Rand looked at Nynaeve, and Nynaeve turned and started walking back inside.

Rand chased Nynaeve down, pulling her around to face him. "He's— he's *dying*," he cried.

"I know," Nynaeve said. The words sounded so simple, so harmless, but Rand's entire body seemed to sag under the weight of them.

"You have to do *something*," he shouted. "You— you *have* to. You're the Wisdom." By the end, his words were little more than a whisper.

"Yes, I am," Nynaeve said. Her voice was cold and firm, but her eyes showed how much it hurt her to say these things. "I know what I can do with my medicines, and I know when it is too late. Don't you think I would do something if I could? But I cannot. I cannot, Rand. And there are others who need me. People I *can* help."

“I brought him to you as quickly as I could,” he mumbled. Egwene was ready to cry herself. She had watched Nynaeve visit dozens of people that morning, and none had even been in danger of dying. Now Rand’s father... it was overwhelming.

“I know you did,” Nynaeve said gently, and touched Rand’s cheek with her hand. *She looks like a mother. I don’t think I looked like that when I touched his cheek.* Egwene felt her face go flush, but she didn’t care. None of this was about her, or them. *This is about Rand and his father.* “Believe me,” Nynaeve said, “I know you did. This is not your fault. You did the best anyone could. I am sorry, Rand, but I have others to tend to.”

She turned back around and went inside. Rand just stood there, staring after her.

Egwene’s discretion disappeared as she felt her belly collapse in on itself and heard one quiet, wordless sob from Rand. She ran up and threw her arms around him from behind. With one arm wrapped around his waist and the other around his chest, Egwene squeezed with all she had. “I’m so sorry, Rand,” she said against his back. “I wish there were something I could do.”

Rand turned around to face her. He still seemed almost vacant, like his mind was somewhere else entirely. “I know. I... I have to do something. I can’t just...”

Slowly, he seemed to come back to where he was, almost as if waking from a dream. “Gwennie, you don’t know what I had to go through, what I had to do to get here. The trollocs, and the rider, the wood was a stranger to me. I-I can’t just let him...” His voice broke, and she hugged him harder. *What rider? What does he mean about the wood? What happened out there?*

“Egwene!” Egwene jumped at Nynaeve’s shout from the house and pulled her arms back. She looked around, but no one had seen them. “Egwene, I need you! And wash your hands again!”

She looked up at Rand. “She needs my help,” she whispered.

“Egwene!”

She pulled Rand to her face again and kissed him, on the mouth, on the cheeks, on the eyes. “I have to go. I will see you soon. I promise.”

“You promise.”

“Yes.”

“What do I do now? Where do I take my father?”

“I don’t know, Rand. I don’t— ”

And then, all of a sudden, she did know. She stepped back and looked Rand in the eye.

“Rand, take him to the woman.”

She waited for him to respond, but he just looked confused. *Of course. He doesn’t know.*

“Rand, we have an Aes Sedai in the village. Take him to her.”

In Search of Aid and Succor

An Aes Sedai in the village.

“What?” Rand was confused.

“Take him to her,” said Egwene. “Aes Sedai can heal where medicines fail. You know the stories. I saw her do it last night.”

The stories said that, but they said a lot more as well. If the tales were true, help from an Aes Sedai was often worse than no help at all. Their gifts were like bait, and their schemes were the hook. Poison in a pie.

“To an Aes Sedai? Are you mad?”

“Not in the least, Rand al’ Thor,” Egwene said in her serious voice. Rand had to stifle a fit of giggles. *I’m so tired.* “Look. I know— even talking about Aes Sedai is... and then seeing one, going to one? But this woman, I like her. She’s done naught but good as far as I’ve seen, and... well, sometimes you have to take a chance. I mean, what else can you do?”

Aes Sedai. Trollocs. This makes no sense. Rand knelt down to check on Father, taking a moment to breathe and think. *Still burning up.* He closed his eyes. *This is mad.* “Nothing.” He stood and looked at Egwene. “Where do I take him?”

“Take him to the inn. My pa will know where Moiraine Sedai is, and he’ll look after him till you can fetch her.”

Moiraine Sedai. “Your pa.” *Where have I heard that name before?* “The inn.”

“Rand, are you alright?” Egwene looked worried.

“I-I’m fine. I just have to help my father.”

Rand squatted at the head of the litter, grabbed the ends of the two poles, and lifted. It felt twice as heavy as when he had set it down moments before. *So tired.* He had gone all night without stopping, dragging Father over the rough terrain of the Westwood because the road was too exposed, too dangerous. He had fought through fear and pain and exhaustion, sure that all would be well once he reached the village. Now...

Just get to the inn. The Mayor will know what to do. He gave Egwene a half-hearted smile. She put her hand on his shoulder and squeezed gently, then turned and ran back inside to Nynaeve. Rand turned toward the inn and started walking.

The Winespring Inn was less than a hundred paces from the Calder house, but it felt much farther to Rand. Each step was more difficult than the last, and before long he was walking with his head down, his eyes focused on his feet, concentrating on every stride. Suddenly the litter felt much lighter. Rand stopped and turned around, afraid that Father had somehow fallen off. Behind him, an older man with white hair and a bushy white mustache had picked up the back of the litter.

“To the inn?” he asked Rand. Without waiting for an answer, the man continued, “Of course, of course. Don’t you worry, boy. Your Wisdom will take care of him. I watched her work last night. 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.”

The Wisdom won’t help. Rand studied the stranger. He was tall, if a bit slouched, with intelligent eyes and strong, gnarled hands. His cloak was a long tangle of colorful patches, each seemingly a different color and size and shape.

“You’re the gleeman,” Rand said flatly.

“That I am. Thom Merrilin, I’m called.”

“Thank you, Master Merrilin,” Rand said, then turned and continued toward the inn. With Master Merrilin helping lighten his load, he could now look around at the village for the first time. Mat’s house was not the only one that burned, but it was one of the few to do so completely, or near enough as to make no difference. To his right, the Green looked as if it had burned in a dozen different places, two dozen, each fire contained within a crater no more than a pace or two across.

“What happened to the Green?” he asked. “I’ve never seen a fire burn like that.”

“That was no fire, boy,” said the gleeman, his voice going hard. “That was the lightning.”

“What? I was in the woods all night. There was no lightning, no storm at all.”

“No, not in the woods. But here. This village has had all manner of visitor these past few days, including an Aes Sedai who can bring lightning down out of a clear night sky. Have you seen ball lightning, boy? What it does, say, to trees? Well, the trollocs fared no better.”

“She— she called lightning down?” Rand felt queasy and almost missed a step. “With the One Power?”

“That’s right,” said the gleeman. “It’s nothing I care to see myself, but, truth be told, it’s by the shelter of Moiraine Sedai’s hand that your village stands today.”

Moiraine. Rand came to a stop as they reached the Winespring Inn. *Mat and Perrin’s lady.* He took the three steps up to the inn’s wraparound porch slowly, trying to jostle the litter as little as possible. *Of course.* The front door was unlatched, swinging gently but never opening more than a few

inches. *I wonder what they think of her now.* Rand was about to kick the door open when he saw something scrawled on it in charcoal— a shape like an upside-down teardrop, but curved like a crescent moon, so the point of it looked like a claw or a fang, the whole thing solid black. Rand stopped short, once again unable to believe what he saw plainly before his eyes. *Why would anyone draw the Dragon's Fang on the Mayor's door? Are they accusing him of evil, or hoping to bring bad luck on his inn and family?* He took a deep breath, kicked the door open, and walked in.

The air in the common room was cold and still; it seemed no one had found time to lay a fire. The Mayor sat at one of the tables, dipping his pen in an inkwell with his head bent over a sheet of parchment. He was the only person in the room and did not look like he expected any company or clientele. His nightshirt was tucked hastily into his trousers and his feet were bare and dirty. “What’s your trouble?” he demanded without looking up. “Be quick with it. I have a score of things to do right this minute, and more that should have been done an hour ago. My time is scarce and my patience more so. 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 leapt up. “Yes, yes, yes. 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... well, no time for that, now. Let’s 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.”

“No!” Rand shouted. The gleeman stopped, already halfway to the door, and Master al’ Vere looked at him in surprise and confusion. “Nynaeve— she wouldn’t do anything. She said she couldn’t help him. But Egwene—” Rand felt his breath catch as he tried to get the next bit out. “Egwene said there was a woman what— that is, she said we had an Aes Sedai in town,

that she might could heal him. She said you'd know where to find her." His voice was nearly a whisper by the time he finished.

Master al' Vere's expression changed from confusion to understanding to something like pity. "I see, lad. Well, yes, of course. Egwene is a bright girl. Mistress Moiraine, well Moiraine Sedai, I suppose I should say, she fair saved us last night. She and Master Lan. You wouldn't know it by some of our good neighbors, though. That fool Darl Coplin spent half the night demanding I put them out of the inn, out of the village, the same one they had just saved." He stopped, seeming to realize that his words had turned into a frustrated muttering directed at his own chest. "Yes, well. You know the Coplins. A whole family of fools. But I do know where she is, lad. She is on the other side of the bridges, where they are... disposing of the dead trollocs. She and the warder."

Rand handed his end of the litter to the gleeman and dashed out the door. Behind him he heard the gleeman's deep voice saying, "Be careful, boy. Aes Sedai do what they do for reasons of their own, and they aren't always the reasons others think."

As soon as he was out the door, Rand broke into a run, his tiredness forgotten for the moment. Within a few steps, Father's sword started to get tangled in his legs. He didn't have time to remove it, so he just held onto it as he ran. His legs felt almost fresh. *A chance for Father.* Rand tried not to think of all the stories he had heard about Aes Sedai, tried to concentrate only on moving, on putting one foot in front of the other, as fast as he could. *Father will not die. Father will not die.* He was so tired, it seemed like someone else's thought floating around in his head. It was odd, how protective he felt of this man who just yesterday had seemed almost a stranger to him. He thought of Mother, of standing by powerless as she died so slowly, and so quickly, too. *Not this time. Not again.*

Rand slowed to a walk as he approached the bonfires, which stood on a large dirt field well beyond the last houses on the west side of the North Road. The wind carried oily black columns of smoke away toward Watch Hill, but it could not carry away the sickly sweet stink of burning trolloc.

Rand gagged at the smell, like a roast of rotten meat left too long on the spit. *A fine thing to do with Bel Tine fires.* Not all the trollocs were burning, though. A few dozen were gathered in small piles around the field. Six or seven men were moving those bodies into the fires, but it was slow work. The men had cloths tied over their noses and mouths, but Rand could tell by the grimaces they wore that the vinegar-soaked rags did little enough to spare them from the stench.

Two of the men were untying the harness straps of one of the Mayor's big Dhurran stallions from a trolloc's ankles. As soon as they were done, one of them mounted the horse and rode back toward the village. *How many more could there be?* Rand scanned the rest of the field. On the far side of the field, next to the last fire, he found what he was looking for. A woman sat cross-legged on the ground. She wore a fine dress of dark blue, and a sky-blue cloak on top of it. The cloak was decorated with silver embroidery that twinkled as Rand walked. At her side stood a tall man with a sword. His cloak had no embroidery to make it stand out. Instead, it seemed to fade away into whatever lay beyond it, changing from grey to green to brown and back again. At times it seemed to disappear altogether.

Rand stopped a few paces away from them. They seemed to be having an important conversation and he didn't want to interrupt. *Can't make a bad first impression.* Rand could not take his eyes off the woman. Moiraine Sedai. He wasn't sure what he expected, but it wasn't this. She looked... like a woman. A bit fancier than the women of Emond's Field— well, a lot fancier, truth be told— but still, just a woman, and a smallish one, as well. Her hair was in some disarray, she had soot on her nose, and she was clearly very tired. *Surely something must mark her as Aes Sedai. This can't be the villain of legend.* Rand shook his head. None of that mattered. She could help Father. There was that before all.

Rand suddenly realized that they had stopped talking and were both now looking at him. He took a deep breath. "Mistress Moir— I mean, Moiraine Sedai." He froze under her gaze. She may have been tired, but she had a hawk's dark eyes, awake and as sharp as the sword at his hip. *Aes Sedai. Breakers of the world.*

“That is I,” she said. “And you must be Rand al’ Thor.” Rand’s breath caught in his chest. *Can she pluck a man’s thoughts from his head?* “A little more light in the darkness. How are your dreams, young master?”

He stared at her. “My dreams?”

“A night like last night can give a man bad dreams. 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. He looked at the man, but he seemed more interested in the dead trollocs 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 Sedai mused. When she continued her voice was firm and clear. “Well, we can speak of prices later, 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. Still, life lends hope, and you and your father are both alive after a harrowing night.” She stood up and dusted herself off. “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.” She looked at Rand before adding, “They have heard the stories, too.”

“He’s at the inn,” Rand said. “This way. And thank you. Thank you!”

They followed, but his long, impatient strides soon had him well ahead. He slowed, waiting anxiously for them to catch up, then darted ahead again and again had to wait.

“Please hurry,” he urged, forgetting his manners for a moment. “The fever is burning him up.”

The warder glared at him. "Can you not see that she is tired, boy? 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 lot are worth it, sheepherder, no matter what she says."

Rand blinked and held his tongue.

"Gently, my friend," Moiraine Sedai said. Without slowing her pace, she reached up to pat the warder's shoulder. "You think only of taking care of me. Why should he not do the same for his father?" Lan scowled, but fell silent. "I am coming as quickly as I can, Rand al'Thor, I promise you."

Rand did not know whether to believe the fierceness of her eyes or the calm serenity of her voice. *Perhaps they go together. Aes Sedai.* He matched his stride to theirs and tried not to think of what price they might talk about later.

A Promise of Safety

Mat was sitting on his bedroll, turning the coin in his fingers when he heard the commotion downstairs. The voices were muffled and he couldn't make out what they were saying, but the urgency in the words was clear enough. He rubbed his eyes, shoved the coin in his pocket, and stood up. He looked over at Eldrin on the bed; she was still asleep. He pushed a stray lock of hair behind her ear and kissed his youngest sister on the forehead. *All will be well.*

Mat stepped out into the hallway, closing the door tight behind him. Before he took a step, he heard someone climbing up the stairwell. *Two men, at least, and their steps awkward.* He went to the top of the stairs and peered down. Below he saw the broad back of Master al' Vere, bent over and pulling something up, with the gleeman below him holding the other end of the load.

Mat backed away to let them by, swallowing hard when he saw what they carried: Tam al' Thor, looking more dead than alive. *The beasts ranged that far west, then. But where is al' Thor? He can't be...* The thought trailed off; Mat was unwilling to finish it.

Master al' Vere and the gleeman passed him without a word and headed straight for the last room on the left, two doors down from where Mat and his family had slept the night before. He had never seen so many of the inn's rooms filled at once. *Never seen a trolloc attack, nor my house burned to ash, neither. Last night slew a lot of nevers.* He shook his head, half disbelieving his own memory.

“Master Gleeman,” he called out, following after the men, “how can I— that is, I would like to help, if I may.”

When he reached the doorway, Master al’ Thor was on the bed and the old gleeman was leaving the room. “Son,” he said, putting a hand on Mat’s shoulder, “I’m afraid there is nothing left to do. Nothing save wait, and hope. The Wisdom has seen him and cannot help. It seems only the One Power can save this man, now.”

“The— the One Power?”

“Aye. His son is off now to beg the Aes Sedai’s help.”

Even just a day before, Mat might have laughed at the gleeman, sure he was making some jest. Now he accepted his statement as a matter of course. He already knew that an Aes Sedai was in the village, and that she could command the One Power. He had seen it himself. Mat took more notice of who was begging the Aes Sedai for help. *So al’ Thor is alive, then. Good.*

Mat poked his head in to check on Eldrin, who still slept soundly. Then he went back to Master al’ Thor’s room and pulled a chair up to his bedside, where the Mayor already sat talking to his wounded friend. When Mat sat down, the Mayor stopped talking and looked at him.

“I just... I thought I’d wait with you,” Mat said. “For Rand.”

Master al’ Vere nodded and turned back to Master al’ Thor.

“Anyway, as I was saying, Tam, it was Winternight. In truth, the festivities had not even really started yet. I’d be surprised if one family had made its first Winternight visit, or if any gifts at all had changed hands. No, all were here, at the inn, listening to the gleeman ply his trade. Why, to hear him tell it, he was just giving us a small taste. But to us, it seemed the finest show a man could give. The juggling was fine, but myself, I loved the stories best.”

Mat just sat there while the Mayor told Master al’ Thor about the night before— from the warder running through the common room yelling about

trollocs, to what villagers were already calling the Lightning Battle on the Green, to which houses had burned, which friends had died, and which neighbors had proven themselves brave.

The story seemed but half done— he had yet to tell even of the band of women, led by Alsbet Luhhan, guarding a house of children with brooms and pans and hatchets— when Rand al’ Thor came running up the stairs with the Aes Sedai and warder close behind.

Mat stood up, as did Master al’ Vere. Before Mat could say a word or extend a hand, al’ Thor was kneeling at the side of the bed, leaning his head against his da’s shoulder. Mat backed away, letting Lady Moiraine— *Moiraine Sedai*— through.

Al’ Thor looked up at her. “My father, can you...?”

Instead of answering, she turned to the Mayor. “Leave me with him, Master al’ Vere. You can do nothing here now save get in my way.”

The Mayor said nothing for a moment, then clapped a hand on al’ Thor’s 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?” Al’ Thor still spoke to the Aes Sedai, though she seemed to be aware of the man lying sick in the bed and no one else. Mat saw Master al’ Vere tighten his grip on al’ Thor’s shoulder, trying to pull him back from his own words, but al’ Thor just kept on. “Please? I’ll keep out of your way. You won’t— you won’t even know I’m here. For true.”

“Yes, yes,” the Aes Sedai said, waving him off. She had tossed her cloak aside and now pushed up the sleeves of her gown. She spoke to al’ Thor but her eyes never left his da. She gestured toward a long bench against the wall. “Sit. Over there. And you, too, Lan.” Her eyes traveled slowly from Master al’ Thor’s feet to his head. *She sees more than I do, no question.* Mat felt a chill run up his neck. It was one thing to know there was an Aes Sedai in the village. It was another to know she was channeling the One Power

not two paces away. “You may talk if you wish,” she went on, “but do so quietly. Now, you go, Master al’ Vere. You, too, young Matrim. This is a sickroom, not a gathering hall. See that I am not disturbed.”

The Mayor grumbled under his breath and grabbed Mat by the arm. Mat tried to catch al’ Thor’s eye as he left, but the boy never looked away from his father. The Mayor pulled Mat into the hall and Lan closed the door behind them.

“Matrim, come,” said Master al’ Vere. “Let us have some brandy.” He paused after a step. “Or maybe cider for you.”

Downstairs, Mistress al’ Vere left some broth simmering in the kitchen to pour drinks for Mat and Master al’ Vere.

“You’ ll have a bite to eat soon,” she said, standing behind the Mayor with her hands on his shoulders, “and it will serve you both well to do it. Now stop your fretting. It’s in Mistress Moiraine’s hands now.”

“I do wish you wouldn’t call her that,” Master al’ Vere said, sounding as tired as he looked. “*Moiraine Sedai* is proper. She might get angry.”

Mistress al’ Vere kissed her husband on the top of head, “I don’t think so, my big bear. She asked for no ‘Lady’ or ‘Sedai’ or whatever. Outlander she may be, but I’ ll take her at her word. Now keep your voices down. If you disrupt them upstairs, you’ ll have to answer to me *and* Moiraine Sedai.” Before she walked back to the kitchen she bent to his ear and murmured, “Tam al’ Thor will be just fine, Pa. Whatever else he might be, the man is a tough old goat.”

The Mayor smiled to himself as she walked away, but his eyes looked sad to Mat. He took a slow sip of his apple brandy and closed his eyes. His smile was gone.

Mat closed his eyes, too, and was surprised to feel how tired he was. *Well, ain’t like I got a lick of sleep last night. Nor did anyone, I expect.* He opened

his eyes, took a long drink of his cider, and exhaled. “Master Mayor, sir. What’s the Council like to do now? I mean, how do you even start?”

The Mayor opened his eyes and looked at Mat for a long moment before answering. “Well, Matrim,” he said, “it’s no accident that outlanders call us stubborn here in the Two Rivers. Those what have heard of us, they know us for our fine wool, our smooth tabac, and our hard heads. Master Fain’s news was bad, and last night was worse and more, but these people, our people, they’ll be fine. They’ll pick up the pieces and build up what’s been torn down. They’ve seen 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’ve come back every time. Just rolled up their sleeves and started from scratch. This will be no different.

“These people are true and hardy; that’s why I choose to be Mayor. I know this about them, and that’s why they deign to let me.”

Mat didn’t know what to say. It was not often that adults spoke to him as they would another adult. He was still trying to think of a clever response when Thom Merrilin walked in the back door, puffing on his long pipe.

“Is the lad back yet?” he asked, joining them at the table. “Did he get help?”

“Aye, he did,” said Master al’ Vere. “They’re upstairs now, tending to Tam.”

The gleeman looked up, as if he could see them through the ceiling. “Good. That’s good.” He looked at Mat and grinned without humor. “It’s not like the stories, is it, son?”

“No, sir,” Mat said, shaking his head. “Not exactly.”

“It never is.”

“You’ve seen this before, then? Or this kind of thing? That is to say, have you seen yourself the kinds of things you sing about?”

“I have. I do, on occasion. A gleeman walks in many lands and sees many things, my boy. This is not the first time I’ve seen shadowspawn, nor the first time I’ve seen the One Power wielded. But like every time before, I do hope it will be my last.”

“Yes, of course,” said Mat. Then he smiled a crooked smile. “But still, it’s pretty exciting, ain’t it?”

The gleeman chuckled. “That is one word for it, my boy, that is one word for it. But death,” he said, the laughter dying in the still air of the room, “death is never exciting. It is cold, and grey, and joyless. It is well and good to laugh as the trollocs flee your village, but it will never be worth the price of their visit.”

Mat looked down at his hands on the table, embarrassed at what he’d said. Master al’Vere must have seen that Mat was uncomfortable, because he chimed in and started a whole new conversation with the gleeman. They let Mat sit in silence, collecting himself and sipping his cider. *Master al’Thor makes the best cider.* It was strange how the last day had changed what would normally be a happy thought into a sad one.

Mat tried to get back in the conversation with Master al’Vere and the gleeman, but it had gone in a different direction and he was totally lost. He decided to check on his sister again and excused himself.

When he reached the top of the stairs, he nearly ran into Moiraine Sedai and Lan as they were starting down.

“Oh, how now, Moiraine Sedai? Master Lan.”

“Well met, Matrim,” Moiraine Sedai said with a soft smile. “You are just who I was coming to find.”

“Me?” he asked. “Why? How’s Master al’Thor? Is he— is he gonna— ”

“He is well. It was not easy, nor done all at once, but it is done. The blade that cut him was made of metal mined and forged in the caves of Shayol

Ghul itself. It was tainted with the evil of that place, and that taint was poisoning Master al' Thor. He would have died unaided. Indeed, I would not have been able to help him without the help of this— an *angreal*.”

She held up a smooth ivory figurine— a woman in flowing robes, with long hair falling about her shoulders, age-darkened to deep brown— before wrapping it in a bundle of white silk and placing it in her pouch. Mat's mouth fell open and he unconsciously leaned back, away from the power of it. A few stories mentioned *angreal*— relics of the Age of Legends that Aes Sedai used to perform their greatest wonders.

“We have lost the making of these. So much is lost, perhaps never to be found again. So few *angreal* remain, the Amyrlin Seat almost did not allow me to take this one. It is well for Emond's Field that she did. Well for Master al' Thor, too. He will make a complete recovery, provided he follows instructions and rests for two or three weeks. I believe Mistress al' Vere will see to that.”

Mat laughed with relief. “Oh, that's just brilliant. That's— ha! — really, just brilliant.”

She smiled. “Come Matrim, I would like very much to speak with you before we leave tonight.” She turned around and walked toward her room.

Mat followed. “You're leaving tonight?”

She didn't answer. She just sat on her bed and invited Mat to sit in the chair. Lan stood against the wall near the door, quiet as death. “Did you know,” Moiraine Sedai finally said, “that some homes here were not attacked?”

He had *not* noticed that; he had been too busy noticing his own home going up in flames. But thinking about it, he saw that she was right. “Still, half the village is in ashes,” he said.

She waved this off with a subtle flick of her wrist. “Some houses the trollocs torched only to create confusion. They ignored them afterward, and the people who fled from them as well. Most of the people who have come

in from the outlying farms never even knew there was any trouble until they saw the village.”

“Aye,” Mat said slowly, “I suppose that’s true.” *Why is she telling me this?*

“Do you know which two houses? Which ones the trollocs attacked in earnest?”

“Well, they put our house to the torch on three sides, and then the fire spread to Berin Thane’s place.” Mat tried to remember. “I know they got the forge and the Luhhans’ house, for sure.” Mat paused, trying to think of another.

“Yes. Your house, and the blacksmith’s house and forge. That is all.”

“That’s all?”

“And only two farms were attacked. Do you know which ones?”

Mat thought about it. “Perrin’s, the Aybara farm. And—” *That makes no sense.*

“And the al’Thor farm, yes.”

“That makes no sense.”

“Be that as it may. Now let me ask you about something else. Your friend Rand told us about a certain horseman. Did you see this horseman, too?”

“I— yes, I did,” he said. “I mean, we all did. Me and Perrin, and Rand al’Thor too. We all did.”

“And what if I told you that I saw him, too? During last night’s attack?”

“You mean he was with the trollocs?”

“He was not *with* them, Matrim. He was *leading* them. I trust you have heard of myrddraal?”

Mat's eyes went wide with surprise. Whatever he had expected to come next, it was not this.

"I will take that as a yes, then. The horseman you saw was, indeed, a myrddraal. It could be nothing else."

"A myrddraal?" Mat nearly laughed. He felt caught between paralyzing panic and delirious disbelief. "But myrddraal are twenty feet tall, with eyes of fire, and they ride shadows like horses. That was no..." His words faded. *She's dead serious.*

"No," she said, "it was not twenty feet tall, nor did it have eyes of fire. But it was a myrddraal nonetheless. We can call it a fade, or a halfman, or a lurk if you like. Different names from different lands, but they all mean the same thing. And it is a thing frightening enough without tall tales about fiery eyes and the like. True, a myrddraal could not best even the weakest Aes Sedai head to head, but many a good man and true has fallen to one."

"I nearly fell just *seeing* him," Mat said. "All he did was look and... I was just so scared."

"No shame in that, boy," said Lan. "They scare me, too. I've seen many a battle-scarred soldier freeze like a bird facing a snake when meeting a myrddraal. In the north, in the Borderlands along the Great Blight, there is a saying. *The look of the eyeless is fear.*"

"The eyeless?"

"Named so because myrddraal have no eyes," Moiraine Sedai said, "though they can see as well as eagles."

"Eyeless." Mat shuddered. "I think I liked them better with eyes of fire."

"I like them better in the Blight," said Lan. "This myrddraal brought its trollocs a long way from home."

“Yes,” Moiraine Sedai agreed. “They were not in Emond’s Field by happenstance, and they did not attack for the joy of killing and burning, however much delight they took in it. No, they knew what, or rather whom, they were after. They came to kill or capture young men of a certain age who live near Emond’s Field.”

“M-my age?” Mat’s voice shook. “My age. Perrin! But he’s alright, yes? So is al’ Thor. H-how did they—?”

“Both are alive and well,” she assured him, “if a tad sooty. All the Aybarras were already here in town for Bel Tine. Many lives were spared because the myrddraal was ignorant of Two Rivers customs. It knew not that Festival and Winternight made its task all but impossible.”

“What— what about Ban Crowe? Lem Thane?”

“They were never in any danger. At least, no more than anyone else.”

“But they’re of an age with us. Ban hasn’t even got a year on me.”

“Master Crowe’s house was not even damaged, 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.”

“How did you—?”

“I have learned much these past two days,” she said, smiling dryly at his surprise. “I said, ‘young men of a *certain* age.’ You and Masters Aybarra and al’ Thor were born within *weeks* of one another. It was you three the myrddraal sought, and no one else.”

This is mad.

“This is mad.”

Moiraine Sedai arched an eyebrow. Mat winced. *Mat. Probably best not to call an Aes Sedai mad. To her face. Just some advice.*

“What would they want with us?” he asked. “We’re just farmers, shepherds. Country boys like any others.”

“I do not know the answer to that question, but I know we will not find it in the Two Rivers,” she said quietly. “And I know that finding it is important. Were it not, we would not have seen trollocs last night in a place where they have not set foot in almost two thousand years.”

Trollocs. Aes Sedai. Myrddraal.

“Two thousand years,” he repeated. “But trollocs go on raids all the time, right? I mean, maybe not here, but it’s not so uncommon for—”

“Boy,” Lan interrupted, “I expect to fight trollocs along the Great Blight, but not here, nearly six hundred leagues to the south. Last night was as hot a raid as I’d expect to see in Shienar, or any of the Borderlands.”

“You, Perrin, and Rand,” Moiraine Sedai said. “The Dark One fears something in one of you, or all three.”

“That’s impossible.” Mat stood and went to the window. It was late morning, and the village had woken up. He could see people walking and working among the ruins, moving with a sense of purpose. *The Mayor is right. The village is already rebuilding.* He turned back to Moiraine Sedai and Lan. “That is just impossible. We’re shepherds and farmers. The Dark One wouldn’t know us if it danced a Sunday hop with us.”

“It took a great deal of effort,” Lan said, “to bring so many trollocs so far without raising a hue and cry from the Borderlands to Caemlyn and beyond. I do not even know how they did it. Does it seem likely to you that they would go to all that bother just to burn a few houses?”

Mat said nothing.

“Matrim,” said Moiraine Sedai, “they came for something, and they will come back and back again until they find it.”

“Come back?” asked Mat. “But you can stop them. You did last night, and they came without warning. Now you know they are here. You will be waiting. You can stop them, right?”

“Perhaps,” she replied. “Knowing that I am here, the myrddraal will probably wait to attack until reinforcements arrive— more myrddraal and more trollocs. I could send to Tar Valon for some of my sisters; they might have time to make the journey before we need them. Enough Aes Sedai and enough warders could fend off the trollocs. Eventually. But I cannot say how many battles it would take.”

Mat looked out the window again. A vision danced in his head, of Emond’s Field all in ashes. *They came looking for us.* All the farms burned. *They will come again.* And Watch Hill, and Deven Ride, and Taren Ferry. *Until they find us.* All ashes and blood. *Find us and take us.*

Mat slowly turned back to Moiraine Sedai. “When you said, ‘before we leave tonight,’ you meant the lot of us. You two, and me, and al’ Thor and Perrin, too. We leave, the trollocs let Emond’s Field be. We stay...” *What about Eldrin, and Bode? What of my parents?* “I— I suppose we could go to Baerlon, or even Caemlyn. I’ve heard Caemlyn has more people than all the Two Rivers. We’d be safe there.” He barked a hollow laugh. “I’ve always fancied seeing Caemlyn. Just not quite like this.”

After a long silence, Lan said, “I would not count on Caemlyn for safety. Walls are a poor bar to myrddraal. If they want you badly enough, they will find a way. And you would be a fool not to believe they want you very badly indeed.”

Farther than Caemlyn. Wow. Careful what you wish for, Matty.

“I know one place where you can find safety,” Moiraine Sedai said softly. “In Tar Valon you would be among Aes Sedai and warders. Even during the Trolloc Wars, the Shadow’s forces 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. That I can promise.”

Tar Valon! Despite the circumstances, Mat could not help but be excited at a chance for such an adventure. Tar Valon, the city of Aes Sedai and warders, the island city that not even Artur Paendrag could conquer. It would be dangerous, certainly, and the stories said never to trust an Aes Sedai. But still— Tar Valon!

“When would we leave? My ma will not be best pleased.” *Not best pleased? Tar Valon is the next thing to Shayol Ghul in her eyes.* “It may take me a day or three to get her to warm to the idea. By which I mean get her to unlock the cellar and let me out for supper.”

“I mean to go soon after full dark. Even a single day’s delay could be fatal. I suggest writing a note. Telling your family is an invitation for argument and delay when time is short and only growing shorter. In fact,” she added, setting her hand on his, “it will be best if we keep all of this just among us. The same ones who put the Dragon’s Fang on the inn door might make trouble if they knew. Do you understand?”

“I suppose,” Mat said, sounding not at all sure. Then he grinned. “My sisters will sorely miss the chance to ignore and torment me before I disappear.”

Moiraine Sedai exhaled and put her hands back in her lap. “Very well. It is decided.”

“What about Perrin and al’ Thor? Do they know? They are coming, yes?”

“Rand knows, and will be with us. Perrin does not know, but he will be with us all the same. In fact, I must go speak with him now.” She stood up. “Get something to eat from Mistress al’ Vere. Then you need to sleep. It will be a hard journey tonight even if you are rested.”

Then she and Lan were gone, and Mat went back to his family’s room. Eldrin was still asleep. Mat lay on his bedroll and stared at the ceiling.

A journey! Mat was terrified. He could hardly wait.

The Old Blood

Rand sat bolt upright, gasping and shivering. He felt as though he had finally broken the water's surface after a frenzied swim from the cold deep. His breaths were desperate and painful. He looked around. He was at the inn, and Father was still asleep on the bed beside him. Rand let out a long breath and closed his eyes. *It was only a dream.* He tried to remember the details, but they were disappearing like a pile of ash in a stiff wind. There had been an island city in a mile-wide river, with bridges of white lace and a million spires shimmering in the sun. Before that, a barren land that had never seen spring. And he remembered running, running from someone he couldn't name or see clearly in his mind. Someone...

The fade. I was running from the fade, toward the safety of the city. But it was there, too, waiting for me. There was no safety anywhere.

Rand's hand was none too steady as he wiped cold sweat from his brow. Half-consumed logs blazed in the fireplace with a good bed of coals built up around the fire irons; someone had tended it while he and Father slept. A blanket lay at his feet, and their cloaks hung on a hook by the door. A cloth-covered tray sat on the chest against the wall, giving off delicious smells.

Outside it was twilight. The moon was fat and round, and evening stars were beginning to sparkle above the Caladaice. *That's the entire day slept away, then.* He rubbed a sore spot on his side; he had slept with Father's sword hilt jabbing him in the ribs. He stood up stiffly and made his way to the tray. Beneath the napkin were beef broth and fresh crusty bread, and some meat and hard cheese. The broth was cold, but tasty nonetheless.

Rand drank most of it, then piled meat and cheese on top of a hunk of bread. Taking big bites, he went back to the bed.

Father's filthy clothes from the night in the Westwood were gone, replaced by what must have been Master al' Vere's nightclothes. Rand touched his forehead; the fever was gone. Father opened his eyes.

"Ah, there you are. Bran said you were here, but I couldn't even sit up to see. He wouldn't let me wake you. Said you were too tired, and that Marin would have his hide. That much is true, I'd wager. Besides, I was too weak to argue."

Father's voice was weak, but his gaze was clear and steady. *The Aes Sedai was right.* Rand took a deep breath and smiled. *He's going to be fine.*

"Are you hungry? Mistress al' Vere left a tray."

"She fed me already, if you can call it that. Let me have nothing but broth. How can a man avoid bad dreams with nothing but broth in his—" Father reached out and put a hand on the scabbard at Rand's waist. "Not a dream. When Marin told me I was sick, I assumed I had been— Bah. You're alright. That is all that matters. What of the farm?"

"Well, 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."

Rand told Father everything that had happened, or at least most of it. How trollocs had crashed into their home. How Father had fought them off, but had also been wounded and taken ill. How Rand had taken Father's sword when he went to get some supplies from the house, and how relieved he had been to find it empty. How Rand had made a litter from bits of their cart, smashed by the trollocs, to carry Father to the village for help.

Father accepted all that pretty easily. After all, it matched his own memories of the night. But when Rand told what he had found in the village, Father's eyes went wide. Half the village burned. Dead neighbors and friends. Some,

like the old peddler, just disappeared— into trolloc cookpots, most like. An Aes Sedai and warder, and his own wounds healed by the One Power. And what the Aes Sedai had told Rand after— including that he, Mat, and Perrin had to leave Emond's Field.

When Rand was done, Father folded his hands under his chin and closed his eyes. "What could a myrddraal possibly want with you three boys?" he asked.

"You think she's lying?" asked Rand. "She was right about just two farms being attacked, and just two houses, as well. I asked the Mayor about it."

After another long silence, Father said, "Tell me what she said. Her exact words, mind you, just as she said them."

Rand paused. *Who ever remembers the exact words they hear?* He chewed at his lip and scratched his head, recounting the conversation bit by bit, as faithfully as he could. "I can't think of anything else," he finished. "She might have said some of it differently, but it's close, anyway."

"It's good enough. It has to be, doesn't it?" Father sighed. "Aes Sedai are tricky, lad. They never lie outright, but the truth they tell you is not always the truth you think it is. You take care around her."

"I've heard the stories," Rand said, going over the tall tales and legends from his childhood in his head. *If trollocs are real, and fades are real, what else is real?* "I'm no child."

"No. No you're not." Father stretched his neck, then shrugged in annoyance. "I should be going along with you, just the same. The outlands are nothing like Emond's Field."

"The outlands." Rand took a deep breath. He had so many questions after last night. "Father, what did you do when you were in the outlands? I've wondered, but never once guessed that you had become a swordfighter. How did that happen?"

Father tried to sit up. He gave up quickly.

“Lad, that’s a longer story than we have time for now, or than I have the energy to tell. I was a boy, foolish and full-hearted, and I wanted to see the world. I came back... well, when I came back, I was a boy no longer. I had a wife, and a son, and I had that sword on my hip.” He straightened up as best he could. “It’s a twisted road what brings a man to the sword, lad. I had hoped yours would be straighter, simpler. But the Wheel put that blade in your hand, and I won’t be the one to take it from you. We will just have to see where your sword path leads you.”

With his finger, Rand traced the heron on the hilt. “But you think she’s right? You think I should go with her? I thought sure you’d try to talk me out of it, that you’d have a hundred reasons to stay.” *For true, I was half hoping you would have a thousand, and all of them good.*

“Maybe not a hundred,” said Father with half a grin, “but a few did come to mind. None counts for much, though. If trollocs and myrddraal 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. If you think you know what they are, think again.”

“The gleeman said something like that.”

“Then he knows what he is about. You listen sharp, think deep, and guard your tongue. That’s good advice for any dealings in the outlands, but most especially with Aes Sedai. And warders, too. Tell Lan something, and you’ve as good as told Moiraine. That bond tolerates few secrets, if any.”

Rand knew little about the bonding between Aes Sedai and warders, but Father’s words made sense to him. “I’ll be careful,” he said. He looked outside, where twilight had disappeared and night had fallen. “For true, I always felt I’d leave this place. It’s never had much use for me, nor I for it. But I never saw this. I just wish I knew why. I can’t see the sense of it. Why me? Why us?”

Father sighed. "Boy, the life we're given isn't always easy, but it's always ours. You, here, was never going to be without its troubles. You have the outlands in your blood, Rand. But you have the Two Rivers in you, too. You'll find that ever more true as you go farther afield. As to why?" Father grimaced. "Blood and ashes, but I wish I knew, too. But no use trying to put a broken egg back in the shell. How soon must you 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 Sedai said— she said you had to stay in bed. She said weeks." Father opened his mouth, but Rand went on. "And she spoke with Mistress al' Vere."

"Oh." Father slumped a little in the bed. "Well, maybe Bran and I can talk Marin around." He gave Rand a sharp look. "You did not answer my question. You're leaving soon, then. Tomorrow? Or tonight?"

"Tonight," Rand said quietly. "With no goodbyes."

"Yes. Well, if it must be done, best not to delay. But we will see about this 'weeks' business. 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. He looked first at Father, then at Rand. "You told him what he missed, then." Rand couldn't tell if the warder meant it as a question or a statement, so he gave just a small nod as answer. "Well enough. Then say your goodbyes quickly, shepherd, and come. We may have trouble."

"Trouble? What kind of— "

"Hurry, boy!"

Rand gave Lan a hard look before leaning in to hug Father. "It looks like I'm away. I'll return as soon as I can." Lan growled. Rand ignored him and

leaned back to look Father in the eye. “I love you, Father. I’m sorry for, for how I’ve been.”

“No need for— ”

“I will come back, I swear it. And, and tell Egwene— ” Rand felt his cheeks getting flushed. “Tell her I’m sorry to go, and I’ll be back before you know it.”

Father arched an eyebrow, then smiled. “Of course you will,” he said with a chuckle. “And I’ll have twice as many sheep for you to tend when you do. I’ll talk to Egwene and the rest. Now go, before that fellow does himself an injury.” Father pulled Rand close and spoke a little more softly into his ear. “Stay sharp, lad. Remember what I told you. And you boys protect each other.”

Rand kissed him on both cheeks and stood. *Time to go.* He hesitated, desperate for a way to stay. But Lan came in, caught him by the arm, and pulled him into the hall.

“Do you not understand the word *trouble*, boy?”

Mat Cauthon was waiting in the hall, wearing a cloak and a coat and carrying a quarterstaff. Mat was good with a staff, as Rand remembered. He might have used that same staff to win the Bel Tine competition if the day hadn’t gone terribly awry. He gave Rand a crooked half smile and said, “Heyo, al’ Thor. The stories feel different from the inside, don’t they?” His words were all confidence, but Mat seemed a bit nervous to Rand, rocking back and forth on his heels and looking at the stairs again and again.

“What kind of trouble?” Rand asked.

“The kind that may chase us from town a mite sooner than expected,” said Lan. He covered the hallway in three long strides and was racing down the stairs before Rand had even shrugged into his cloak. Mat dashed after him, leaving Rand to follow on his own.

When Rand got downstairs, he was surprised to find the common room empty except for the three of them. It was dark—the few candles still burning were on the verge of dying out—but he could make out Mat standing next to one of the front windows, peeking out as if trying not to be seen. Lan held the door open a crack and peered into the inn yard.

What are they looking at? And why are they hiding? Rand joined Lan at the door. The warder muttered at him to take a care and opened the door a trifle wider.

At first he was not sure what he was seeing. Some three or four dozen village men were clustered near the burnt husk of the peddler's wagon, carrying torches that pushed back the night. They were facing Moiraine Sedai, who stood with her back to the inn. From behind she looked completely at ease. From what little Rand had seen, he was sure she looked just as composed from the front.

Hari Coplin stood at the front of the crowd with his brother, Darl, and their cousin Bili Congar. Cenn Buie was there, as well, looking uncomfortable. Hari was shaking his fist at Moiraine Sedai, a scowl etched deep in his sour face.

“I said leave! Leave Emond's Field!” the farmer shouted. A few voices in the crowd echoed him, but hesitantly, and no one pushed forward. Maybe they'd confront an Aes Sedai from within a crowd, but none wanted to be singled out.

“You brought those monsters!” Darl roared. He waved a torch over his head. Master Congar led shouts of, “You brought them!” and “It's your fault!”

Hari elbowed Master Buie, who pursed his lips and gave him a sidelong glare. “Those things... those trollocs, they didn't appear until after you came,” Master Buie muttered, barely loud enough to hear. His eyes kept darting around, never quite looking at Moiraine Sedai. *Probably looking for a way to sneak out.* “You're an Aes Sedai. We want none of your sort in the

Two Rivers. Aes Sedai bring trouble on their backs. Stay and you'll only bring more."

His words brought no response from the gathered villagers. Hari 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. Rand just looked on, shocked. He had never heard such threats of violence before. Such things just didn't happen in the Two Rivers. Cenn Buie, Bili Congar, and the Coplins were left out front alone. Master Congar looked as if he wanted to back away, too.

Hari looked back at the crowd with a start, but he recovered quickly. "Get out!" he shouted again, echoed by Darl and, more weakly, by Master Congar. Hari glared at the others. Few in the crowd would even meet his eye.

Bran al' Vere and Haral Luhhan moved out of the shadows then, stopping apart from both the Aes Sedai and the crowd. In one hand the Mayor 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 fair dove into the crowd. "Not that," Darl said. "We never said that, Bran... ah, Master Mayor."

Bran nodded. "Then perhaps I heard you threatening to harm guests in my inn?"

"She's an Aes—" Hari began angrily, but cut his words short.

Master Luhhan stretched his thick arms over his head and cracked his knuckles with his thumbs. He 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 am 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 miss my guess there’ll barely be a scar. And you, Cenn.” The thatcher had started to fade back into the crowd, but stopped when Bran called out to him. “I wouldn’t think to find any man on the Village Council here, Cenn, but you least 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, haven’t you at least got any shame?”

Master Buie opened his mouth, then closed it with a resigned sigh. “I cannot deny what she did. She helped me and others,” he muttered, and he did sound ashamed. “But she’s an Aes Sedai, Bran, and trollocs followed her into town. We want no part of Aes Sedai. Let them keep their troubles away from the Two Rivers.”

Now in the safety of the crowd, a few men backed Master Buie with shouts and handclapping.

The Mayor looked fit to burst with anger, but before he could say a word, Moiraine Sedai spoke up. “Is this what Aemon’s blood has come to?” Her voice was not loud, but it overwhelmed every other sound in the yard. Now all the torchlight seemed to fall on her, and Rand could not look away. “Little people squabbling for the right to hide like rabbits? You have forgotten who you were, *what* you were. Still, I had hoped some small part was left, some memory in blood and bone. Some shred to steel you for the long night coming.”

Her words met with silence. It was the Mayor who finally spoke. “Forgotten who we were? We are who we always have been. Honest farmers and shepherds and craftsmen. Two Rivers folk.”

“Here you call the river to the south the White River,” Moiraine Sedai said, “but far to the east, men still call it by its rightful name. Manetherendrelle. In the Old Tongue, Waters of the Mountain Home. Two thousand years ago, those sparkling waters flowed by the walls of a mountain city so lovely 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, and the Red Eagle banner of Manetheren gave these mountains their name. Caladaice, from *caldazar*, ‘red eagle’ in the Old Tongue.

“Aemon al Caar al Thorin was king, Aemon son of Caar son of Thorin, and Eldrene ay Ellan ay Carlan was his Queen. Aemon, so courageous that even his enemies boasted that their champions 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. It would have shocked Rand if someone had. He was bound in the quiet power of her voice, and he knew without looking that everyone else was, too. When she spoke again, he drank it in, just like all the rest.

“For nearly two centuries the Trolloc Wars had ravaged the length and breadth of the world. Wherever battles raged, the Red Eagle banner of Manetheren was at the fore. Manetheren was a thorn to the Dark One’s foot and a bramble to its hand. Sing of Manetheren, that would never bend knee to the Shadow. Sing of Manetheren, the sword that could not be broken.

“The men of Manetheren were on the Field of Bekkar, called the Field of Blood, when news came that a trolloc army was moving against their home. They were too far away to do anything, anything but wait to hear of the death of their land and families. Too far to do aught but mourn. But this would not stop the men of the Mountain Home.

“They set out without a moment’s thought, marching from the very field of victory, still covered in dust and sweat and blood. Day and night they marched. None would sleep until Manetheren was safe; they had seen the devastation a trolloc army left in its wake, and would not see their home in such ruins. They moved as if their feet had wings, marching farther and faster than friends hoped or enemies feared possible. When the waves of the shadow armies crashed down on Manetheren, the men of the Mountain Home stood before them, with their backs to the Tarendrelle.”

One of the villagers raised a small cheer then, but the Aes Sedai kept on as if she had not heard. “The host they faced was enough to daunt the bravest heart. Ravens blackened the sky. Trollocs blackened the land, trollocs with their human allies— darkfriends in tens of tens of thousands, and dreadlords to command. So many came that, come night, their cookfires outnumbered the stars. In the day, their banner flew high for all to see— the banner of Væ’ alza, an ancient name for the Dark One.

“Still the men of Manetheren would not be cowed. They knew their task: keep that host, and the power with it, from crossing the river. Aemon had sent out messengers. Aid was promised if they could hold for but three days at the Tarendrelle. Hold for three days where holding for an hour would seem a great triumph. Yet somehow, through bloody assault and desperate defense, they held through an hour, and through the second hour after that, and then through the third. For three days they fought, and though the land became a butcher’s yard, they yielded no crossing of the Tarendrelle. 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?” the Mayor asked, the authority in his voice replaced now with wonder.

“Aemon crossed the Tarendrelle,” Moiraine Sedai said, “destroying the bridges behind him. And he sent word throughout his land for the people to flee, for he knew the dreadlords would find a way to get the trolloc horde

across the river. And even as the word went out, the crossing began. 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, Queen Eldrene organized the flight of her people into the deepest forests and the fastness of the mountains.

“But not all fled. 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 the men. No one made that journey who did not know they would never return. But it was their land. It had been their parents’, and it would be their children’s, and they went to pay the price of it. The army of Manetheren gave not a step of ground until it was soaked in blood, but at the last it was driven back, back to here, to this place you now call Emond’s Field. And here the trolloc hordes surrounded them.”

Her voice sounded of cold tears. “The piles of dead trollocs and darkfriends grew ever higher, but never high enough to stop the endless tide of enemy soldiers. There could be but one finish. No man or woman who had stood beneath the banner of the Red Eagle at dawn still lived when night fell. The sword that could not be broken was shattered.

“In the Caladaice, alone in the emptied city of Manetheren, Eldrene felt Aemon die, and her heart died with him. 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. 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 back over 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. Their only thought was of flight, until at last not one of them remained in the lands of Manetheren. And in the lands they fled to, other armies, serving other kings and queens, hunted them down until none was left alive who did murder at Aemon's Field.

"But that final vengeance carried a steep price. 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 too 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 remained of their farms, their villages, or their great city. Outsiders said there was nothing left for them, nothing but to flee to other lands where they could begin anew. The people of the Mountain Home did not say so. They had paid the blood price, and hope now bound them to that land more strongly than steel. They stayed, and built, and farmed, and lived. Generation upon generation held the land that was theirs, though never again did Manetheren rise. Its soaring spires and splashing fountains became as a dream that slowly faded from the minds of its people. And still they held, even 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."

When she was done, the torches seemed to light the whole yard again, and Rand could hear the sounds of the night. After a long moment, Paet al' Caar shouldered past the Coplins.

"I don't know about your story," the long-jawed farmer said. "I'm not like to ever be a thorn to the Dark One's foot, for true. 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, he pushed back through the crowd. Others began to mutter and wander off then, sounding ashamed and looking more so. Even the Coplins vanished into the night without a word.

Lan pulled Rand back and shut the door. “Alright. We’ll have some time, but not much. Let’s get going.” The warder started for the back of the inn. “Quickly, you two. We haven’t a second to waste.”

Rand hesitated, watching Lan’s back and then Mat’s as they strode away. This was the real beginning— leaving the inn and following the warder into the night. He shook himself, and tried to summon some courage.

“What are you waiting for?” Lan asked from the door that led into the kitchen. Mat quickened his pace, and Rand hurried to catch up. He took a deep breath and followed them through the darkened kitchen and out into the stableyard.

Leavetaking

The knife and wood were a poor substitute for the forge, but they kept Perrin's hands busy. *Busy hands, quiet mind.* That's what Mum always said, and he'd found it true enough. Perrin liked a quiet mind, and the madness of the past day and night had his head spinning. Such a state made it easy to fall victim to one's own quick and careless thinking. Forge work was best for calming the mind, but knife and wood were all he had, so whittling would have to do. He wasn't trying to turn the wood into anything in particular. He was just trying to keep his hands busy.

Perrin sprang to his feet when Lan rushed through the door.

"Did you look the way I told you, blacksmith?" asked the warder.

"I looked," Perrin replied. "There's nobody here but us. Why would anybody hide—"

"Care and a long life go together, blacksmith." Lan ran a quick eye around the stable. A single lantern hung from a nail on a stall post. Shadows swallowed most of the stalls, and the hayloft above was in complete darkness. "'No time,'" he muttered, shaking his head. "'Hurry,' she says."

Behind Lan came Mat and Rand, looking every bit as out of sorts as Perrin felt. When Lan went to check on the horses, Perrin walked over to them, putting the wood in his pocket and the knife in his belt. He looked at Mat. "A thousand years of sheep, eh?"

"Well, we're making up for it now," Mat said, flashing a grin. "But did you hear Moiraine Sedai's story about the Two Rivers?"

“No. What? No, I’ve been here, waiting on you and making sure the stable is empty.” He looked over at Lan, who was examining cinches and girth straps, and the leather ties behind the saddles that held saddlebags, waterskins, and blanketrolls. “I brought some clothes and sundries for you, Rand. I knew you’d have no time to go to the farm, so—”

“Oy!” Mat interrupted. “Two of those are my da’s horses. And two of his finest, I’d say. He must have gotten a pretty price for them.”

Perrin looked more closely at the five horses the warder was tending. Two were too fine to be any but his and Moiraine Sedai’s. The tall, deep-chested black stallion would be his, and the sleek white mare with an arched neck hers. Lan must have bought the others that day, and all three looked to be among the best the Two Rivers had to offer. Perrin didn’t recognize Mat’s da’s horses, but he knew the third well enough. Cloud was a tall grey with a black mane and tail, and a favorite of Jon Thane’s. The miller often raced him against merchants’ horses, and Perrin had never known Cloud to lose—or to give anyone an easy ride, either. Lan must have given a huge price to make the miller sell. And Mat’s da was the finest horse trader in the Two Rivers; he never got cheated. All told, the three Two Rivers horses must have made a fair dent in the warder’s purse.

“Much obliged, Perrin,” said Rand. “I hadn’t even thought of that.”

“Not at all.”

“Oy, what’s that, then?” asked Mat, looking at Rand and laughing. Rand’s face twisted into a scowl. “Al’ Thor fancies himself a warder now,” Mat went on, pointing at Rand’s hip.

Rand was wearing a sword. *How under the sun did he get a sword?* Perrin absentmindedly fingered the blade at his own waist, then. Mat saw and started hooting, “What do you have there? I guess it’s the merchants’ guard for the both of you.”

Perrin gave Mat a frown. *A fine time to be having a laugh.* Then he sighed and tossed back his cloak, revealing the axe hanging from his belt. It sat in a

leather cover, a kind of sheath, with a simple hook clasp to secure it. Even so concealed, it was plainly no common woodsman's hatchet. A broad half-moon blade on one side of the head and a spike on the other named it a weapon, not a tool. It was every bit as strange for the Two Rivers as Rand's sword. But it wasn't strange to Perrin. It had been his for more than two years now.

"Master Luhhan made it a while back," he explained, "for a wool-buyer's guard. But when it was done the fellow wouldn't pay what he promised, and you know Master Luhhan ain't gonna take less. He gave it to me when... well, when he found me practicing with it." That got another laugh from Mat, which brought another frown from Perrin. "Said I might as well have it since he couldn't make anything useful from it."

"Well, I can see an honest man's weapon ain't good enough for you two," Mat said with a smile. Perrin gave him a hard look, but after a moment relented and started chuckling himself. Rand didn't laugh, or even grin.

"Honest men have no weapons separate from the rest of us," Lan broke in. "Anything can serve if the one wielding it has the will and the nerve. Whether yours be a sword or a sling, an axe or an awl, the man it kills is just as dead. Trollocs aside, you'd best have that clear in your minds before we leave if you want to reach Tar Valon alive."

Lan's voice was like boots on gravel, and his face was not much softer. Even Mat lost his smile then. The warder must have judged them convinced; he grunted and went back to checking the horses. A long silence stretched between the three boys.

"Not much like the stories," Mat said.

"I don't know," said Perrin. "Trollocs, a warder, an Aes Sedai. What more could you ask?"

"Do you believe her?" Mat asked. "I mean, what would trollocs want with us?"

Perrin gave a nod toward the warder and moved back toward the stable door. He stopped the far wall and turned back toward the others. Mat was just a step or two behind him, but Rand hadn't moved at all. Perrin gave a little sideways nod and silently mouthed, "Come on." After a few seconds, Rand sighed and walked over to join them.

The three of them huddled together, but no one said anything for a long moment until Rand surprised Perrin and broke the silence. "I don't know how much I believe her, 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 that they're after us as anything else I can think of."

Perrin and Mat exchanged a worried look. "You asked the Mayor?" Mat asked. "She said not to tell anybody."

"I didn't tell him why I was asking," said Rand, turning a little red. "I just wanted to hear more about what happened in the village. What, you didn't talk to anybody at all? Your family doesn't know you're going?"

Perrin shrugged, unsure now if he had made the right decision. "Moiraine Sedai said not anybody," he said.

"We left notes," Mat said. "For our families. They'll find them in the morning. If I'd told my ma, she would *never* have let me go. Besides, it's what Moiraine Sedai said to do. Burn me, but if anyone knows what to do about trollocs, it should be an Aes Sedai, no?"

"Aye, I suppose so." Rand rubbed at his temple. "Everything is such a jumble in my head. My father believes her, anyway. At least, he agreed that we had to go."

"You told your father we were leaving?" Moiraine Sedai stood in the doorway, clothed in dark grey from head to foot, with a skirt divided for riding astride.

“I couldn’t go off without letting him know,” Rand answered. “He’s been through enough this day.”

She eyed him for a moment with pursed lips before turning to Perrin and Mat. “And you? Did you also decide that a note was not enough?”

“No, Moiraine Sedai,” Perrin said. “I left only a note, just as you said.” He thought Mat said much the same, but he couldn’t be sure as they were talking over each other in their haste to answer.

Nodding, she waved them to silence. “Well, 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.”

“As for horses, we will need another,” she said, stepping into the stable. Behind her in the doorway stood Egwene, the hood of her dark brown cloak pulled up and a shawl-wrapped bundle in her arms.

Perrin looked at the others, wondering who had told her, but they both looked as surprised as he felt, if not more.

“Moiraine, no!” Lan recovered first, his words erupting in a fury though his face stayed stony calm. “Why?”

“Egwene here figured out for herself that the boys were coming with us when we left. I suppose it was too much to think no one would, between the extra horses and some young men’s difficulty in going unnoticed.” Her eyes lingered first on Mat, then on Perrin. Perrin tried to casually bring his cloak back over his axe, feeling the fool. Even Mat looked abashed. “The girl showed up at our door with her travel pack ready, refusing to be left out. Of course, her mother happened by just then and required an explanation. One that did not involve an Aes Sedai stealing her youngest. Well, the Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills. Mistress al’ Vere and I had a nice long talk, and decided together that Egwene would be joining us.”

The warder did not look convinced but said nothing more.

“You were already gone to find three horses, Lan,” Moiraine Sedai added. “I had no chance to tell you we would need a fourth.”

After a long moment, Lan gave her a slight nod. His eyes stayed hard, though. “I suppose she can ride the gleeman’s horse,” the warder said. “I’ll leave him enough to buy another.”

“That will not be possible,” rang Thom Merrilin’s voice from the hayloft. Lan’s sword left its sheath in a heartbeat, the reflected lamplight making it seem almost to be made of fire.

The gleeman 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,” he said, making his way down the ladder, “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. “I ain’t think to look in the loft,” he mumbled.

The gleeman reached the stable floor and tried to brush the straw from his patch-covered cloak. He looked at Perrin and held his eye for half a second, then did the same with Mat and Rand. “In fact, 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 never made the list, even in passing.” He looked askance at the warder’s sword. “There’s no need for that, now. I am but an old man.”

“You seem more to me, Master Bard,” Moiraine Sedai said with a slight smile. “In any case, we must go quickly, and at great risk. The trollocs are still out there, and we go by night. Are you certain you wish to travel with us?”

“If it is not too dangerous for the girl, it cannot be too dangerous for me,” he said with an amused smile. Then he turned back to the boys. He didn’t

frown, exactly, but he was not smiling anymore, either. “Besides, what gleeman would not face a little danger to perform in Tar Valon?”

“Moiraine,” Lan said, “this party is too large already.”

“The dwindling time concerns me more than our growing number. We must be as far away as possible by daybreak. If we leave him behind, he could rouse the village before we have gone a mile, and that would surely warn the myrddraal.”

“Myr— the myrddraal?” Egwene asked no one in particular.

Lan looked at the gleeman again, then gave a small nod to the Aes Sedai and scabbarded his sword.

“Now,” Moiraine Sedai said, “what horse for Egwene?”

“The peddler’s horses are as bad as the Dhurrans,” said Lan. “Strong, but slow plodders.”

Perrin spoke up. “Rand, what about Bela? She’s here in the stable.”

“Bela,” Rand repeated absently. He was staring at Egwene, but didn’t seem to see her. After a moment, he shook his head a little and looked Perrin in the eye. “Bela. She— she could do. She won’t 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. “I suppose we have no other choice.”

“Then she will have to do,” Moiraine Sedai said. “Rand, find a saddle for Bela. Quickly, now. We have tarried too long already.”

While Rand went to the tack room to find a saddle and blanket, Perrin pulled Egwene aside. “What are you playing at?” he asked. “The only one of us what wouldn’t stay if he could is Mat, and it’s even money he’s just faking. You’re mad if you think this is a good idea.”

“Perrin Aybara. You don’t know the first thing about it. My whole life the outside world has been calling to me, and I’ve never had a way to answer. Now, the day after I get my braid, I get my best chance, maybe my last chance, to go on a real journey. Do you really think I would let it pass? This journey was meant for me as much as for any of you. I can *feel* it.”

Rand came back and took Egwene’s bundle from her. He tied it on behind Bela’s saddle while she mounted and adjusted her skirts. She looked down at Rand then, and he up at her. They seemed locked in a staring contest. “Thank you,” she finally said. Rand looked down, checking the length of the stirrups before scratching Bela between the ears rubbing her neck.

“This ain’t that kind of journey,” Perrin said to Egwene. “Them trollocs are after us. The three of us. Ain’t some grand adventure. We’re running like cravens, driven from our homes by monsters out of a gleeman’s tale.”

“Are you really trying to dissuade me from doing exactly what you are doing right now?” She laughed a little. “Well, I won’t be turned away. Certainly not by telling tales to make yourselves seem important. Really.”

“Egwene al’Vere,” Rand said. She seemed not to hear; her eyes stayed on Perrin until Rand put his hand on her leg. “Egwene.”

She turned and looked at him blankly for a moment. Then her face went flush and she brushed his hand away. Rand swept his hair back from his face. “This road is no place for a young lady,” he said. “You’ll not be safe with us.”

“But you think I’d be safe here?” she asked. “The same village that stands in ruins after trollocs attacked just last night? Burn me, Rand, but we still draw breath— those of us who do— only by of the grace of those two strangers. And they’re leaving. Now. And you’d have me stay here? For safety? I’ll take my chances out there, with them.”

Rand stood up straight. “That’s foolishness. If you— ”

“Enough shepherd,” came Lan’s voice. He was mounted and ready to go. “Everyone. It’s time. Who among you is the best rider?”

“Mat,” Egwene offered. No one countered. It was pretty indisputable.

“Very good,” he said, turning to Mat, “take the miller’s horse. Shepherd, blacksmith, take your pick between the other two.”

While Rand finished securing Egwene’s things to Bela, Perrin mounted the horse closest to him— a tall dun mare with a white patch from just below her mane to the tip of her nose. As he settled in the saddle, Rand mounted the last horse, a chestnut stallion, and they were ready to go. Perrin took a deep breath. *This is it, then.* An owl hooted in the night outside, which set some dogs off barking.

“Dogs,” Moiraine Sedai said to Lan.

“Well and good,” said the warder, “but better they were wolves.”

“What is, is,” she said.

“Better they were wolves?!” said Perrin.

“Wolves don’t like trollocs, blacksmith,” Lan said, “and trollocs don’t like wolves. They don’t like dogs too well, either, but they’ll go to some lengths to avoid wolves. A few good howls would tell us that no trollocs lay in wait.” He led them into the moonlit night at a slow walk.

Moiraine Sedai rode directly behind him, and Egwene kept hard to the Aes Sedai’s side. Perrin and Mat were next, with Rand and the gleeman bringing up the rear.

Behind the inn it was dark and silent, and dappled moon shadows filled the stableyard. The soft thuds of the hooves faded quickly, swallowed by the night. When they got to the deep shadows beside the inn, just on the point of leaving the stableyard, Lan pulled up short and motioned 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.

The footsteps halted before the inn, 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 and an old jerkin sewn all over with steel disks straining across his chest, that Perrin 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 untold years, each with a spear or a woodaxe or a rusty bill.

Getting out of the village without being seen would be no easy task, it seemed. *If the trollocs return, at least we will not be surprised this time.*

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.

"Fool farmers," Lan muttered when the sound of their boots had faded. "Two trollocs would have them all for breakfast. Still, they have eyes to see us when we can't afford to be seen. Come."

Slowly, quietly, the warder took them back across the stableyard, down the bank through the willows and into the Winespring Water. The cold, swift stream sparkled as it swirled around the horses' legs. So close to the spring, the water was deep enough to lap against the soles of the riders' boots.

Climbing out on the far bank, Lan led the line of horses on a serpentine route that kept them in darkness and as far from village houses as possible. Now and then he stopped and signaled for silence. Perrin never saw or heard what made the warder stop, but each time he did, another patrol passed by. Bit by bit they made their way toward the north edge of the village.

Perrin peered at the high-peaked houses in the dark, wondering when he would see them again. Before long they passed beyond the last farmhouses on the outskirts of the village and into the countryside, riding parallel to the North Road that led to Taren Ferry. *What will the night sky look like over other villages, other districts? Surely not so beautiful as this.* The clear black seemed to reach to forever, and countless stars gleamed like points of light scattered through crystal. The moon, only a hair less than full, appeared almost close enough to touch, and—

A black shape flew slowly across the silver moon. Perrin's involuntary jerk on the reins stopped the dun cold. "That's no bat," he thought aloud. Rand pulled up beside him, looking where he was looking.

"No," Rand agreed, "it flies like a bird of prey— an eagle, or a falcon. Slow. Powerful."

"It must be the size of a man."

The shape crossed in front of the moon again, then dove and disappeared into the black.

Perrin felt a touch on his arm and turned to see Lan beside him. He had not even realized that the warder had ridden back to them. "What are you two staring at? We have to keep moving." The others waited behind Lan.

Perrin and Rand looked at each other.

"We saw a shape," Rand said, "a flying creature with wings like a bat. It passed before the moon."

"Wings like a bat, but it flew like an eagle," Perrin added. "Hunting."

Perrin waited for Lan to dismiss it as a bat, or a trick of the eyes.

Instead, the warder growled a word that seemed to taste even worse than it sounded. "Draghkar." Egwene and Mat looked to the sky, while the gleeman hung his head and groaned softly.

“Yes,” Moiraine Sedai said, her face showing nothing. “It is too much to hope otherwise. And if the myrddraal has a draghkar at its command, then it will soon know where we are, if it does not already. We must move more quickly than we can cross-country. We may still reach Taren Ferry ahead of the myrddraal, and it and its trollocs will not cross as easily as we.”

“A draghkar?” Egwene said. “What is it?”

“The war that ended the Age of Legends spawned worse than trollocs and halfmen, lass,” said Thom Merrilin.

“Enough,” Lan said before anyone could ask the gleeman for more. “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. Perrin listened to the pounding hooves and tried to quiet his mind.

Across the Taren

I should have worn gloves.

With Bela at a full gallop, the cold night air was like a gale beating against Egwene's bare hands. Her knuckles felt like they might crack open, and she could hardly feel the reins clenched tightly in her fists. Not that Bela needed much direction. Egwene doubted the sturdy mare could give much more in her desperate attempt to match the pace set by Moiraine Sedai and the warder. Those two, with their horses that looked fit for royalty. Egwene had met people from the outlands before—merchants, peddlers, even a gleeman when she was very young—but these were the first that she could not have imagined coming from the Two Rivers. They hardly seemed like people at all, with their grace and their accents and their bravery.

And the One Power, of course. *What must it be like to be able to do such things?* And here she was feeling chuffed with herself at Nynaeve's suggestion that she could learn to listen to the wind. *How embarrassing.*

Egwene peeked over her shoulder, half checking on the riders to her rear and half checking for any sign of the draghkar. Rand was just a couple of lengths behind her, and Master Merrill a few beyond him. The sky was empty, as far as she could tell. Emond's Field was far gone now; she saw no trace of it.

Perrin and Mat were ahead of her, but Egwene tried to stay focused on Moiraine Sedai's mare at the front of the line, its white coat gleaming in the moonlight. *Am I falling behind?* She wasn't sure, but she thought she felt Bela beginning to tire. *No wonder, after running from the farm to the village*

last night. She leaned forward a little, as much as she dared, and hoped the mare had just a little more in her.

Egwene saw something move from the corner of her eye and looked to her left. Rand had pulled almost even with her.

“Come on, Bela!” he shouted. “Come on, girl! Move it! Run, run, run!”

Egwene smiled at him, but he was focused on the horse. He kept shouting at her, encouraging her, and she must have understood. Egwene could feel the mare steady and pick her pace back up. Egwene wondered how much longer Bela could go as Rand fell back behind her.

On and on they raced, northward into the night. The farmhouse lights flashing in and out of sight became fewer and farther between, and soon disappeared altogether. The only relief from the darkness then was the pale, thin light of the moon. The wind was a mournful moan, like a tuneless whistle over the rhythm of Bela’s pounding hooves.

Abruptly Lan slowed, then brought the group to a stop and dismounted. When she caught up to the front of the line, Egwene saw a strange set of lights sparkling on a hill ahead, like a swarm of fireflies hovering in absolute stillness. *Windows. Watch Hill.* She could hardly believe they had come so far. She doubted anyone had ever made the journey faster. She hopped down to the ground, stretched her back, and tried to blow some heat into her hands.

“Much as I would like to put all these villages behind me,” Master Merrill said as he dismounted, “a few hours’ rest would not go amiss right now.”

“If we’re stopping the rest of the night in Watch Hill,” said Mat, “we may as well go on up.”

A gust of wind carried the sound of laughter and songs, as well as kitchen smells that made Egwene’s mouth water. *No trollocs to ruin Bel Tine here.* She slumped against Bela and closed her eyes. She felt as tired as the horses looked.

“I could do with some singing,” Mat went on. “And maybe a hot mutton pie at the White Boar.”

“Aye, it’s no Winespring Inn, but the White Boar ain’t so bad,” Perrin said. “A mutton pie for me, too. And hot tea. Lots.” Egwene smiled at the thought of tea and opened her eyes.

“We cannot stop until we are across the Taren,” Lan said. “Not for more than a few minutes.”

“But the horses,” said Egwene. She could feel Bela still trembling from the hard run that had gotten them this far. “We’ll run them to death if we try to go any farther tonight. Moiraine Sedai, surely you—”

The Aes Sedai was moving among the horses, briefly laying her hands on each one’s neck. Mat’s and Perrin’s both responded with a toss of the head, a soft whicker, and some restless stamping of their feet. *She’s giving them instant rest, here, with the Power.* Bela was next, and Egwene just stared at Moiraine Sedai in awe and wonder.

When she had seen to every horse, the Aes Sedai walked back to her own, saying, “You were right about your Bela, Rand. She has a good and stubborn heart, a true Two Rivers horse. Stout as she is, she may be the least weary of all.”

Egwene smiled. Even though she deserved none of the credit, she felt a sense of pride at the compliment for her mount. Her smile disappeared when a scream ripped the darkness, all rust and ice and tar. Heavy wings swooped low above the party, deepening the night shadows.

Bela rose high on her hind legs, kicking at the air and screaming while her eyes rolled wildly in her head. The mare thrashed about as if desperate to unhorse a rider; it was all Egwene could do to hold on to the reins and stay on her feet.

When Bela returned to all fours, she and Egwene were both trembling. The mare stood on stiff and anxious legs, nostrils flaring and eyes rolling. As

Egwene took a few deep, shaky breaths, she saw that she was not the only one having trouble with her mount. The rest of the party was in chaos, engaged in the same dance as she and Bela. Except, of course, for the Aes Sedai and the warder. Moiraine Sedai sat straight in her saddle, the white mare stepping delicately away from the confusion as if nothing at all were amiss. Lan scanned the sky on foot, sword in one hand and reins in the other, his sleek black stallion quiet beside him.

It wasn't until she heard a fiddle start playing that Egwene realized that Watch Hill had fallen silent. The draghkar's scream had cut all merrymaking short, but it could not interrupt Bel Tine for long. Soon a flute had joined the fiddle and the village had resumed its celebration.

Sheathing his sword, Lan leapt onto his stallion. "The beast would not have shown itself unless it had already reported our whereabouts to the halfman." Another strident shriek drifted down from far above, fainter but no less harsh. Again the music from Watch Hill staggered into a ragged silence. "It tracks us now. The halfman won't be far. Mount!"

Even Mat had trouble obeying that command. The horses pranced and backed away from their riders. Master Merrillin was the first in his saddle, and the others were not far behind. Mat and Egwene were the last ones ahorse, and they shared a brief look of relief and mutual understanding before setting back off at a gallop again. Before long they were over the hill and out of earshot of the few dogs that had barked at their passing.

On the other side of Watch Hill, the line they had been riding in melted into a vague cluster with Lan and Moiraine Sedai at the head. The warder tried in vain to get them to spread out again, but Egwene for one did not want to feel so exposed. She stayed hard on Mat's right flank, who seemed on the verge of splitting the warder and Aes Sedai and taking the lead himself. Master Merrillin rode on Mat's far side, with Perrin and Rand bringing up the rear.

Again Egwene lost all sense of time. All was the four beats of the gallop, and the rhythm of her own breath, and the soft ache in her thighs and back.

Never in her life had she ridden so fast. Bela matched the larger horses' every stride, her tail and mane streaming after her. Egwene's own braid flew behind her like a flag in a storm, and the cold wind made her skin feel alive even as it hurt a little. *Freezing, terrified, running for my life. And I'm enjoying it. I must be mad.* But when she looked at Mat to her left, he was smiling as big as a cat with a secret. He actually winked at her. She smiled back; she couldn't help it. Her smile became a laugh, and her laugh became a joyous shout into the wind. "Hyah! Hyah, Bela!"

They raced over another hill, and on the other side a wisp of fog rose up around them, thin and no higher than the horses' knees. Bela galloped through it in a couple of strides, but then another streak of ragged grey whisked by on the right. It was larger than the first; in fact, it seemed to be growing, almost seeping out from the ground. The party dove in and out of bigger patches, and above them the draghkar screamed again. Suddenly they plunged into not a patch of grey but a wall of it. The party was enshrouded in a fog so thick that Egwene could barely hear Bela's hoofbeats. She could make out where Mat and Moiraine Sedai were to her left, but only just. The others were lost to the fog.

Still they did not slow. From ahead, Egwene heard Lan and Moiraine Sedai shouting to one another. "This is well enough," the warder said, "but there is still but one place we can be going." His voice was hoarse with shouting, but sounded hollow in the fog.

"Myrddraal are sly," Moiraine Sedai replied. "I will use its own slyness against it."

She's doing this. This! Egwene was amazed. The fog was so thick that she couldn't even see Bela's feet, and it stretched who knew how far in every direction. She had heard stories of women controlling the elements with the One Power, but seeing it, *touching* it, was something else again.

"Everyone!" Lan's voice was louder now. "Stay close. Make sure you can see the person in front of you. We are trying to lose the halfman, not each

other.” Egwene wondered how he could know where they were going in the frosty greyness, but knew she could only trust and follow. And hope.

In the fog, she lost track not only of time but of space, too. She saw nothing but grey, and heard nothing but the muffled drumming of the horses’ hooves. Stars and moon were hidden, as were forest and farmhouses. Nothing in that featureless ashen fog changed.

This went on for hours, Egwene was sure. It *must* have been hours. She was no longer certain they were all still together, and at moments doubted if even the few shapes she could see were really her companions. Only the rush of air past her face and the gather and stretch of the horse beneath her told her she was moving at all. It must have been hours.

Finally she heard Lan call out, “Slow. Draw rein.”

When they came to a stop, strange, tall houses loomed in the fog on all sides. Egwene had never seen this place before, but she had heard it described many times. Tall houses built on redstone foundations high enough to survive the spring floods, when the melt in the Caladaice drove the Taren to overflow its banks. They had reached Taren Ferry.

Taren Ferry was the closest thing the Two Rivers had to a city. She had not met many Taren Ferry folk, but she knew their reputation: prideful, crafty, and false. She was rather curious to meet some, but none were out at this hour. The street was empty, and the only sound was the muted cllop of their horses’ hooves.

Lan brought them to a stop outside a tall, dark house indistinguishable from any other in the village. He leapt to the ground and climbed the stairs to the front door, fog swirling around him. By the time he reached the top, Egwene was looking up at his feet. He hammered his fist against the door three times, then waited. A moment later he did it again. When still no one answered, Lan started beating on the door and didn’t stop. A light appeared in the window of the next house, and someone shouted curses down at them, but the warder just kept on.

Finally a man in a nightshirt and bare feet threw the door open and peered out at Lan, holding an oil lamp high so he could see the warder's face. His eye's narrowed in suspicion, then bulged as he noticed the fog. "What's this?" he said. "What's this?" Chill grey tendrils crept into the doorway, and he took a quick step back.

"Master Hightower," Lan said. "Just the man I need. We must cross over on your ferry."

The man's eyes narrowed again as he looked down at the rest of the party. "The ferry goes over in daylight," he said after a minute. "Not in the night. Never in the night. 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, then closed it again. Egwene heard a clink, then saw a glint of gold reflecting the lamplight. Lan was counting coins out into the other man's palm. Master Hightower licked his lips as Lan kept counting, inching his head ever closer to the growing stack of gold in his hand.

"And as much again," Lan said when he stopped, "when we are safely on the other side. But we leave *now*."

"Now?" Chewing his lower lip, the ferryman shifted his feet and peered out at the mist-laden night, then nodded. "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, letting go of the ferryman's wrist. "For a little while."

Master Hightower jerked the handful of coins to his chest and, nodding agreement, shoved the door closed with his hip.

Lan came down the stairs, telling them to dismount and lead their horses after him through the fog. Egwene still could not see more than a few paces in front of her, but by now she trusted the warder to find the way.

The streets remained empty, though here and there a light appeared in a window as some early riser stirred. The thick mist turned most of these to dim patches, and as often as not that hazy glow, hanging in the grey, was all that was visible. The rare house that could be seen at all seemed to float on a sea of cloud without a neighbor around for miles or more.

The long night's ride had taken its toll on Egwene. She did not ride often, and hardly ever at a gallop. Her back was stiff, her hands sore, and her entire body tired. She walked in silence, and heard little from her companions except for an occasional curse when one stubbed a toe or tripped a little. Master Merrill grumbled for a bit under his breath, something about wine and food and fire, but he soon fell silent, too.

Egwene wondered how Rand, now two spots behind her in the line, was doing. It felt strange that they had been on this mad ride together but had hardly seen each other at all. She wanted to feel his arms and chest and breath, and most of all his warmth. She wondered what it would be like to be away from home with him, without parents or neighbors or anyone from the village. Anyone save Mat and Perrin, and they hardly counted. *They wouldn't tell, would they?*

Distracted, she walked into something large and warm in the murk: Mat's stallion. Lan and Moiraine Sedai had stopped, and the rest of the party did the same. Egwene patted Bela's neck, as much for her own comfort as the mare's. The fog seemed to have thinned a bit. She could make out the shapes of all six of her companions, if not very clearly. But their feet remained hidden, and she still could not see any of the houses from where she stood.

Lan hissed loudly, then dashed to Perrin's side. Pointing at Rand and Mat, he threw Perrin's cloak back, exposing that absurd great axe. Following suit, Rand threw back his cloak to show that sword he was wearing. Mat pulled his quarterstaff from his pack and leaned against it like a large walking stick. Lan nodded and returned to his horse. Then bobbing lights appeared in the mist and muffled footsteps approached.

Master Hightower came, followed by six thick men in rough clothes. The torches they carried burned away a patch of fog around them. When they stopped, the wall of grey surrounding them all 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.

All eyes were on Lan, who leaned against his saddle with apparent nonchalance but rested one hand on the long hilt of his sword. Egwene saw Rand put his own hand on his sword then, no doubt hoping to take on some of the air of danger that surrounded Lan. She smiled a little; he was not entirely successful.

Perrin eased his axe in its sheath and planted his feet. Mat stood up straight and brought his staff in front of him. He was not in a fighting stance, but he was not far from one, either. *Boys.* Master Merrill stepped forward then, holding up an empty hand and turning it slowly. A sudden flourish, and a dagger twirled between his fingers. He slapped the hilt into his palm and, with an air of unconcerned calm, began trimming his fingernails.

Egwene clapped and giggled before shoving her hands under her arms in embarrassment. But even Moiraine Sedai gave a low, delighted laugh, and she heard the boys gasp a little.

Master Hightower seemed far from amused. He stared at the gleeman, then cleared his throat. "There was mention made of more gold for the crossing." He looked around at them again with a sly and sullen 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 goes into your hand," Lan told him, "when we are on the other side." The leather purse hanging at his waist clinked as he gave it a little shake.

The ferryman nodded with a grunt. "Let's be about it, then," he muttered, and stalked out into the fog, followed by his six helpers. Their torches burned away the fog around them as they moved. Egwene hurried to keep up before they were lost in the grey again.

After a few steps, Egwene heard her shoes scrape on wooden planks. The ferry landing. She had heard it described as a bridge that led nowhere except to the ferryboat. *A bridge to nothing, in a deep, wide river with currents that could pull the strongest swimmer under.* Egwene wrapped her fingers tightly in Bela's mane.

Before long they were at the foot of a ramp that led to the rear of the ferry. The large wooden barge had a three-foot wall along all four sides, except for a strip about eight to ten feet wide at the top of the ramp. A pair of ropes as thick as Egwene's arm ran from massive posts at the end of the landing into two large iron rings at either end of the wall along the ferry's stern. From there they continued toward the bow, seeming to float in the air until they vanished into the misty night along with the front of the boat. The travelers followed Master Hightower's men onto the ferry and waited while they made ready to cast off. The ferryman shouted badgering directions at his men, who seemed to move at the same reluctant speed whatever he said.

At last all was ready. The men loosed the moorings and the ferry lurched in the strong current before the guide ropes caught and held it. Three to a side, the haulers planted their feet in iron footholds and grabbed hold of the ropes. On a count of three, they began pulling the ferry forward along the length of the ropes. Hand over hand, they slowly but relentlessly moved away from the landing, which soon disappeared in the fog. With the banks and even the water hidden, it seemed as though the ropes were moving instead of the ferry. The travelers all kept close to the center of the boat. Once they seemed to be safely underway, Egwene walked by Rand, touching him lightly on the elbow as she passed. She continued till she reached the bow, then stopped and looked out at the fog. A few seconds later she felt Rand walk up, stopping short so that he stood over her right shoulder. She turned around wrapped her arms around him. She held him close for two or three breaths, then turned around and pulled him alongside her. Now they both stared into the pale haze.

"Are you alright?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said. "Well, as well as can be expected, I suppose. You?"

“Yeah. I mean... yeah. Scared, of course, but... this is just so *exciting*.” She gave him a big smile, but he just looked incredulous.

“Yeah, trollocs and fades and creepy Aes Sedai fog and those screaming, flying beasts. Exciting, sure.”

Egwene’s smile died on her lips. It had not occurred to her that the thrill of galloping hard into the unknown with danger at their tail would be completely lost on Rand. To her, it felt like the spark of his skin touching hers— the breathless uncertainty, the threat of discovery, the fascinating strangeness of a new experience. Could he not feel it, too? She was afraid, but she felt *alive*. And the two of them were together, away from home. *Shouldn’t he be at least a little excited?*

“Those Taren Ferry men,” she said, trying to change the subject, “do you think they’d have robbed us for true?”

“I don’t know. Lan seemed concerned. That’s enough for me. I mean, you know what they say about Taren Ferry folk.”

Egwene nodded but couldn’t think of anything more to say about that. “And that sword,” she offered. “That’s your pa’s?”

“It is.” Rand ran his fingers along the hilt and stared off absently toward the far bank.

“I m— ” Egwene started. “When Moiraine Sedai told me he would be alright, I was so relieved.”

“He got it out there,” said Rand, still looking out into the night. “In the outlands, I mean. I never even knew he had it before last night.” He wrapped his fingers around the hilt but didn’t say any more.

Sometimes Egwene had to fight to keep herself from screaming at Rand. She could be looking him in the eye, having a conversation, and he could seem as far away as if he were on his pa’s farm. She hated it. It was so

much easier when they were just touching. She took a step closer and rested her head on his chest.

He dipped his head down so that his chin rested on her crown. “Why did you come, Gwennie? This isn’t a game, and it isn’t fun. Those trollocs really are after us. Moiraine Sedai and Lan both say so. I’m already running for my life, and now I have to worry about keeping you safe.”

Egwene took a step back, her mouth hanging open. She was almost too surprised to be cross. Almost.

“Blood and bloody ashes, Rand,” she said in her most forceful whisper. “I’m not helpless. You may carry your father’s blade, but you are no more a swordsman than I. Maybe *I’ll* look after *you*. You’re obviously too afraid to take care of yourself.”

Anger flashed in Rand’s eyes. “Afraid? Of course I’m afraid. Are you too proud to admit the same? Or too much the fool to feel it?”

“Fool?” she blurted out. “Who’s the one who could have a girl in his arms and— and in his bedroll, but scolds and insults her instead?”

“Me? Insult you? Which of us pretends the other doesn’t exist whenever other people are around?” Rand paused, opening his mouth and then closing it. “Bedroll?”

Egwene felt her face flush. “Nice try, Rand. I guess we’ll never know, will we?”

She turned and walked back toward the others, looking for an escape from this increasingly uncomfortable conversation. Moiraine Sedai stood at the stern, looking into the fog. Egwene walked up to her, standing silently at the older woman’s side. The fog, as thick as ever, still kept the far bank out of sight.

“This fog,” Egwene said, “it’s really amazing. I’ve never— That is, I’ve heard stories about the— the One Power, but I had no idea.”

Moiraine Sedai looked her in the eye, but Egwene could not tell at all what she was thinking or feeling.

“Such things make many... nervous,” she finally said, turning her gaze away from Egwene and back toward their unseen destination. “Master Hightower, his men, even some in our own party. But not you.”

“I think it’s... wonderful. I’m full of wonder.”

Moiraine Sedai smiled then. “Of course you are.”

What does that mean?

Egwene heard a loud thud as the ferry shuddered and stopped. They had reached the far bank. Egwene went with Moiraine Sedai to fetch their mounts. The haulers hurried to lash the craft fast and turn the bow wall into a ramp. *We’re leaving the Two Rivers for true, now.* Moiraine Sedai went down the ramp first, with Egwene right behind. Mat and Perrin followed, then the gleeman, and Rand after him. Lan was last, but followed close on Rand’s heels.

“Here, now!” cried Master Hightower. “Hey! Where’s my gold?”

“It shall be paid, Master Hightower,” Moiraine Sedai said from the landing. “And a silver mark for each of your men. For the quick crossing.”

The ferryman hesitated then, but the mention of silver roused his haulers. Some paused to seize a torch, but they all thumped down the ramp before Master Hightower could say anything. Grumbling, he followed his crew down to the landing.

The grey mist was as thick on the north bank as it was over the river. Lan was handing out coins at the foot of the ramp, his stony face well lit by the torches Master Hightower’s men carried. Moiraine Sedai was also toward the end of the landing, but she stood alone, looking back over the river the way they had come. Everyone else stood several paces down, huddled in an

anxious cluster. Egwene carefully avoided eye contact with Rand, and as far as she could tell, he did the same.

“There,” Lan said. Egwene looked back to the warder, who was handing the last coin to Master Hightower. “As agreed.” But Lan did not cinch up his purse, and the ferryman’s eyes did not leave it.

Just then the landing creaked and shivered. Everyone turned their eyes toward the ferry. Though the mist hid most of it, Egwene had no problem seeing where the ferry was. Master Hightower’s men had left a pair of torches on board, one at the bow and one at the stern, and they created two dim, fuzzy points of light visible even in the fog. The landing groaned, and with a thunderous crack of snapping wood, the twin glows lurched, then began to revolve. Egwene cried out wordlessly. To her right, the gleeman cursed.

“It’s loose!” Master Hightower screamed. He grabbed his men and 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 his shoves, then stopped. The faint lights on the ferry spun faster, then faster still. The fog above them swirled, then, sucked into a spiral. The landing trembled. Egwene and Bela took a few cautious steps back toward land. Then the ferry itself began breaking apart, filling the night with the sound of cracking and splintering wood.

“Whirlpool,” one of the haulers said, his voice filled with disbelief.

“No whirlpools on the Taren.” Master Hightower sounded empty, as though he were talking in his sleep. “Never been a whirlpool...”

“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 reached into his purse again, still in his hand. “Here, this should repay you.”

For a moment the ferryman stared at the gold, glinting in Lan's hand in the torchlight, then his shoulders hunched and his eyes darted to the rest of their company. Egwene was too entranced by the sinking ferry to pay him any mind. She stood with the rest, gazing at the pair of lights spinning around each other. *She bends the world around her.* Master Hightower gave a frightened cry and snatched the coins from Lan. He whirled around and ran past the others, quickly disappearing in the mist upriver. His men were only half a step behind him.

Moiraine Sedai and Lan rejoined the others at the far end of the landing. "There is nothing further to hold us here," she said casually. Leading her white mare, she started away from the landing, up the bank.

Nothing left to hold us here. Egwene took one last look at the spot where the ferry had sunk, then turned to follow the Aes Sedai up the sloping bank. Within three paces the heavy mist faded away to nothing. She stopped and turned back to look at the river. Now outside and a little above the fogbank, she could see that it ran along the near side of the river in both directions, as far as the eye could see. Beyond the fog, the night sky was clear and brilliant, still dark though the moon hanging low in the west hinted at a dawn not far off.

After another few paces, the slope started to level off. The grass and bushes of the bank gave way to the woods that stretched north of the Taren. The Aes Sedai and the warder had stopped here to confer, and the others were gathering in a cluster not far away.

"It follows the river as if drawn with a pen," Moiraine Sedai was saying. "Not ten women in Tar Valon could do that unaided. Not to mention from the back of a galloping horse."

"Eh, I don't mean to complain, Moiraine Sedai," Master Merrill broke in, "but would it not have been better to cover us a little farther? Say to Baerlon? If the draghkar looks on this side of the river, we will lose all that we have gained."

“Draghkar may be fearsome and dangerous, with sharp eyes, but they are not very bright, Master Merrill,” said Moiraine Sedai. “The beast will tell the halfman that this side of the river is clear, but the river itself is cloaked for miles in both directions. The halfman will know the extra effort that cost me. It will need to consider that we may be escaping down the river. That will slow it down. It will have to divide his efforts. The fog should hold long enough that it 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.”

“Hmm, yes,” the gleeman said, nodding. “Of course. Very good, Aes Sedai.”

“Ah, Mistress— I mean, Aes Sedai.” Mat stopped to clear his throat. “The ferry— ah— did you— I mean— .” He took a breath. “I just don’t understand why...” He trailed off weakly, and the silence he left in the group seemed to pulse in Egwene’s ears. She stole a glance at Rand, who appeared queasy and was looking off in the distance with exaggerated indifference.

“You all want explanations,” Moiraine Sedai said, sounding quite matter-of-fact, “but if I explained my every action to you, I would have no time for anything else.” Though she was the shortest person there, she looked taller in the moonlight. She almost seemed to loom over them. “Know this. I intend to see you safe 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, into the edge of the wood.

“I don’t suppose we could rest a bit,” Perrin said to Moiraine Sedai, ending with a yawn. Egwene slumped against Bela and sighed her agreement.

“We do need to rest, Moiraine Sedai,” Master Merrill added. “We have, after all, ridden long and hard tonight.”

“Then I suggest we see what Lan has for us,” she said, turning toward the woods. “Come.”

Bare branches were not enough to block out the sky, but they did thicken the shadows. A few hundred paces in they came to a dark mound beside a clearing. When Egwene got closer, she saw that it was a great, thick tangle of leatherleafs. *Must have been some flood.* Moiraine Sedai stopped beside the heap of trees, and a light appeared low to the ground, coming from under the tangled wood.

Thrusting a stub of a torch ahead of him, Lan crawled out from under the mound. “No unwelcome visitors,” he said, straightening up. “And the wood I left is still dry, so I started a small fire. We will rest warm.”

“You knew we would be stopping here?” Egwene asked.

“It seemed a likely place,” Lan said. “I like to be prepared, just in case.”

“Very good,” Moiraine Sedai said. “Will you see to the horses? Come, Master Merrillin, children. I will put some tea on and do what I can about everyone’s tiredness.”

She crouched down and disappeared under the great pile of tree trunks. Craning her neck, Egwene saw a low opening there, barely big enough to crawl into. She waited as the boys filed through, then ducked down to follow. The opening was the beginning of a short tunnel that led to a woody cave. The space was easily large enough to hold them all, though the roof of tree trunks and branches came too low to allow them to stand. Moiraine Sedai was sitting at a fire built on a bed of river stones, filling a pot with water from a skin. The branches of the roof had enough space between them to let the smoke out, but not so much that the fire had been at all visible from outside. *Clever.*

The three boys were already seated at the fire, all opposite Moiraine Sedai. It seemed they were afraid to get too close. Not Egwene. She took a seat directly to the Aes Sedai’s left. Across the fire, Mat and Perrin were speaking to each other in hushed tones. Rand was listening and didn’t even

glance in Egwene's direction. *Me? He's the fool. More interested in boys he wouldn't even call friends than in me.*

Mat looked up then and caught her eye. He flashed a wide grin, like the one he'd been wearing as they fled to Taren Ferry. She smiled back weakly, but turned away when Rand looked over. Just then Master Merrillin came and sat on the other side of Moiraine Sedai. That was everyone, save Lan.

As they took their seats, Moiraine Sedai began pouring out tea for each of them. When Egwene took her cup, she closed her eyes, lowered her face into the steam, and inhaled deeply. *Chamomile. Lavender.* It smelled good. It *felt* even better, the warmth of it in her hands and on her face.

She opened her eyes to see everyone else taking the same pleasure in a hot cuppa.

"I ain't never thought to be this far from home," Perrin said. "Remember when Watch Hill seemed a long way?"

Egwene remembered. It was yesterday. *Only that long?*

"In a month or two, we'll be back," said Mat, his mouth gaping in a monstrous yawn. "Think of the stories we'll have to tell."

Egwene smiled. An account of this night alone would have them talking till Sunday in Emond's Field. A month or two of tales would become local legend, passed down from one generation to the next.

"Well," said Rand, "I suppose even trollocs can't chase us forever." He did not sound convinced.

"Even if they could," Moiraine Sedai said, "there are some places even trollocs dare not tread. Now, let me see what I can do to help your bodies rest."

Having watched what she did with the horses, Egwene was excited to see what this would feel like. The Aes Sedai started to her right, though,

meaning she would get to Egwene last. First was Thom Merrill. Moiraine Sedai knelt next to him and gently put her hands on his head. The gleeman jerked away, but she seized his grey head with a look that allowed no nonsense. He scowled through the entire thing. She smiled at him when she took her hands away, but his frown only deepened. *But he does look refreshed.*

Mat seemed a little nervous, and Perrin more so. But Rand was clearly the most ill at ease. When Moiraine Sedai finished with Perrin and turned to Rand, he scooted back a little. “I don’t—” he started to protest, but the Aes Sedai went to work on him before he could say more. When she was done, he looked refreshed and dumbfounded, as if he couldn’t believe how much better he felt.

After Rand it was finally Egwene’s turn. She turned toward Moiraine Sedai expectantly, but Lan walked into the tree cave and interrupted.

“The horses have eaten,” he reported. “I would have removed their saddles, but we may need to leave in a hurry. They’ll have to bear a little discomfort this night.”

The shrill scream of the draghkar suddenly echoed from above the fog-covered river. Then again, closer now, and again, piercing and foul. Then the cries were fading, until they had faded away entirely.

“Luck,” Lan breathed. “It searches the river for us.”

“Have a seat, Lan,” said Moiraine Sedai.

“Take mine,” said Master Merrill. “I feel like I’ve slept a full night in a fine bed, but unless I miss my guess, I’ll still need whatever rest I can get tonight.”

He crawled to an open space near the wall, curled up, and was asleep almost as soon as he lay down. The boys followed suit while Moiraine Sedai poured tea for Lan and herself. She closed her eyes, took a deep

breath, and made a little motion in the air with her hand. Then she opened her eyes and turned to Egwene.

“Egwene, how do you feel about the things you have seen this night?”

“You mean with you. And the One Power.”

It was not a question, and Moiraine Sedai gave only the hint of a nod in response.

“How do I feel?” asked Egwene. “Fascinated. Frightened. Um, just really curious. And maybe, maybe a bit...envious?”

The words sounded small in Egwene’s ears, and she was embarrassed that she had said them. Embarrassed more that they were true. But Moiraine Sedai only smiled.

“I felt the same way when I first encountered the One Power. Awed and overwhelmed and, yes, envious. It is a powerful gift, and a rare one. Only a very few can learn to touch the True Source and use the One Power. Even fewer have no need to learn. At least, touching the Source will come to them whether they will it or not. I was one of these. Born with the spark, we say. But even such women need training in Tar Valon. Without it, they never learn to channel the Power fully, and most do not even survive. Men who can touch the Power die, of course, if the Red Ajah does not find them first. But 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.” She 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 realize it.”

What? Egwene sat shocked, her mouth hanging open. *Is she saying...?*
What is she saying?

“You are very close to your change, Egwene. I can feel it when I look at you. It is this that I discussed with your mother. She has no great trust of outsiders, and she was loath to see you go. But she would rather watch you leave than watch you die. I had planned to send one of my sisters for you when I arrived in Tar Valon, but it seems the Wheel had other plans. You figured us out, you packed your bag, and here we are. You were born with the spark, Egwene, and you are coming to Tar Valon for your training.”

Spark?

“This journey will not be over in a month, or even a year. It will be a long time ere you see the Two Rivers again. But when you do, unless I miss my guess, you will be an Aes Sedai.”

Egwene barked a delighted, disbelieving laugh. *I'm going to be an Aes Sedai?*

I'm going to be an Aes Sedai!

Book Two: In Flight

Lessons on the Road to Baerlon

It must have been a full hour before sunset when Lan called out for them to halt. The first two days hadn't seen them stop before twilight. Perrin wondered why today was different.

"It is a long way to Tar Valon," the warder said. "Long enough, I hope, to teach you how not to hurt yourselves with those weapons. We begin this evening."

Perrin's fingers went unconsciously to his axe. Their adventure had so far been pretty miserable—chased by shadowspawn, saddle-sore from all-day riding, camping on rough ground without even a proper fire for fear of being seen—but this promised to be golden, for true. Trained to fight by a warder! A smile crept up his lips.

"Egwene, your lessons will begin now, as well," Moiraine Sedai added.

Egwene said nothing in return, but she smiled so wide Perrin could almost hear it. *What lessons could she have with the Aes Sedai?* The answer came right on the heels of the question. Perrin's breath caught. He looked at the others. Mat's eyes were wide and his mouth hung open a little. When he saw Perrin, he shrugged and ran his fingers through his hair. Rand was harder to read. He looked over at Egwene, but looked away quickly as he dismounted and tended to his pack. Perrin had hoped to get a chance to know Rand better on this journey, but those hopes had proven vain. Rand hadn't said more than a few words to anyone since they'd left the Two Rivers.

Egwene learning the arts of the Aes Sedai gave him no comfort, but he could do nothing for it now. As for Rand, Perrin hadn't been able to figure him out over the past sixteen years and had no reason to think he'd do any better tonight. Instead, he focused on these lessons from Lan.

Perrin hopped off the dun, took his axe from its sheath, and walked over to where the warder was clearing space for them to train and practice. He had played at fighting with the axe before, but had no real idea how it was done. He was sure Rand was no more skilled with the sword. Mat knew his way around a staff, though; he would certainly have the upper hand in any sparring.

The other two boys were right behind Perrin, and Lan started the lesson as soon as he was satisfied that they had enough room.

"Sheepherder," the warder began, "step here and let me see that blade."

Rand walked to the center of the clearing and handed Lan his sword. Lan looked at it closely before speaking. "This is a fine weapon." He turned it in his hands, then traced over an engraving near the base of the blade. "I'd not have thought to find a heron-mark sword in Emond's Field. This is your father's?"

"Aye," Rand said. The warder said nothing; he just kept looking over the sword. Finally Rand went on. "He bought it a long time ago. Out here. In the outlands."

Lan looked up from the sword, those cold blue eyes locked now on Rand. "Strange thing for a sheepherder to buy," he finally said.

Perrin shifted uncomfortably. This seemed almost a private moment, and he wanted no part of it. *Those are eyes to make a clothed man feel naked.* He hoped they would not look at him so when his turn came.

"He said so, too. Said he never had any use for it. Until Winternight, anyway. I didn't even know he had it till then."

“He called it useless, did he? He must not have always thought so.” Lan ran his finger along the entire length of the blade, first one side and then the other. He spoke almost as if to himself. “In some places, the heron is a symbol of the master swordsman. What strange road did this blade travel to end up with a sheepherder in the Two Rivers?”

Perrin had thought it odd himself that Rand’s da had a sword, but had not stopped to wonder how he came by it.

After handing the weapon back to Rand, Lan took two steps back and drew his own.

“Now,” he said, “attack me.”

Rand stood there for a moment, not moving. He looked at Perrin, but Perrin had no guidance to offer. He just shrugged and looked back and forth between Lan and Rand. After a long moment Rand set his feet and lunged at Lan. The warder fended Rand off easily, hardly seeming to move. He gestured for Rand to come at him again. Rand lunged again, and again Lan deflected his blow. They went through this three or four times before Lan sheathed his sword and spoke.

“Well, you are quite hopeless, sheepherder, but that’s to be expected. The good thing is that you haven’t any bad habits to break. Very well. Let us begin.”

For the next half hour, Mat and Perrin sat by and watched with rapt attention as the warder taught Rand the beginnings of sword fighting. They spent most of the time working on basic footwork, but by the end Rand was learning his first strike and parry maneuvers. They went through them a few times, then Lan called Rand’s part of the lesson to a close.

“Good. Now, while I work with these two, you practice what you have learned to the side. Practice with the blade, but practice with your mind, too. Some think moving the blade enough. They are wrong. The mind is part of it— most of it, really. Blank your mind, sheepherder. Empty it of hate and fear, of everything. Burn them away.” He looked at Mat and Perrin.

“You 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.”

“The flame and the void,” Rand said. “That— that’s what you mean, isn’t it? My father taught me about that.”

Lan caught Rand in his blue eyes again. “Hold the sword as I showed you, sheepherder. I cannot make you worthy of that blade in an hour, but I would like to keep you from slicing off your own foot, at the least.”

Perrin had no idea what either of them was talking about.

“Blacksmith. Your turn. Hand me your weapon.”

Lan looked over Perrin’s axe, but the examination was brief beside the one he had given Rand’s sword.

“Well made. Is this your work, blacksmith?”

“No,” said Perrin, “that’s a master’s work for true. Mine ain’t near so clean, not yet. Master Luhhan made that axe, for a man who wouldn’t pay. It fell to me, then.”

Lan held the axe away from him, turned his wrist one way then the other, and took a few light swings.

“The balance is good,” he said. “The curve of the blade will help you parry, as will the iron langets. You need not worry about a sword halving your haft, even if you catch its full force crosswise. The haft is short enough to use with one hand, but long enough that you can use two should you want the added power.”

He handed the axe back to Perrin. Perrin followed as he started walking into the wood.

“With the axe, as with the sword, you must remain balanced on your feet. Striking an enemy will feel much like chopping wood— to your arms. But

your legs will need to stay balanced, ready to strike again or to block your enemy's attack." Lan stopped beside a copse of thin, leafy trees that Perrin didn't know. "You will practice swinging against trees for now. They will not strike, parry, or dodge, but they should keep you from spinning yourself into the ground."

As with Rand, Lan stressed footwork, and little besides. Before too long, Perrin was beginning to get the feel for generating power without losing his balance. Swinging the axe had a rhythm, like swinging the hammer in the smithy. He imagined fighting as a kind of dance without music. The dance had sweat running down his back and the sides of his face. For the first time in days, he was enjoying himself a little.

Then it was over.

"A good first effort, blacksmith. You've worked hard here, likely harder than you realize. That axe is not overly heavy, but neither is it light." Lan pointed at a fallen log. "Sit and catch your breath, then go through these exercises with the shepherd—without the axe. Practice with your mind, and go through the motions. I have one more farm boy to tutor."

Perrin sat down begrudgingly as Lan started talking to Mat; he would much rather have continued the lesson. But when he paused to breathe, he realized the warder was right. He *was* tired. He concentrated on his breath, felt the light burn of the air in his lungs. *Lan said to blank your mind. Make it empty.* Those words had made no sense before. Now he thought he understood a little. *Empty it, so there is only the dance. Surrender to the dance.*

Perrin stood up and walked over to Rand, ready to practice with his mind.

“The True Source exists outside of time and space. It is nowhere and everywhere at once. It is not of our reality; it is beyond it. The True Source is where the Creator stood and brought the world forth. From the True Source flows the One Power, which turns the Wheel of Time, which weaves the Pattern of the Ages. In time, you will learn to touch the True Source. When you do, you will be able to draw on the One Power, to channel threads of it and weave them into your own design. You will know a small part of what it must have felt like when the Creator made the world.”

Egwene sat across from Moiraine Sedai, entranced. Both had their legs crossed; their knees touched lightly.

“When we touch the True Source, we touch only one half of it. *Saidar*.” Moiraine Sedai cupped her hands together in front of her. “*Saidin*, the male half of the True Source, and *saidar*, the female half, work in conflict and in concert to generate the One Power. *Saidin*”— she lifted one hand, then let it drop— “is fouled by the touch of the Dark One. It is like water with a thin slick of rancid oil floating on top. The water is still pure, but you cannot touch it without touching the foulness. Only *saidar* remains safe to touch.”

Moiraine Sedai lifted her hand. From it hung a thin gold chain with a blue gemstone pendant, sparkling in the twilight. Egwene remembered it from earlier; the Aes Sedai had been wearing it in her hair.

“So that is...does that have the One Power in it?”

“Tsk,” said Moiraine Sedai. “Things cannot have the Power, child. Even an *angreal* is but a tool. This is only a pretty blue stone. But it can give off light.”

Suddenly the stone did not just sparkle, it flashed. One small burst of blue light, and it was done.

“Even without my help,” Moiraine Sedai continued, “you will soon channel the One Power. But 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.”

“Unpleasant?”

“Something you need not worry about.”

She took Egwene’s hands in her own and cupped them together, then laid the stone on her fingertips. Egwene’s hands trembled. Gently, Moiraine Sedai touched one hand to Egwene’s wrist and the other to the side of Egwene’s head.

“Look at the stone,” she said softly. “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.”

Light bloomed in the stone as before, a single blue flash no brighter than a firefly. Egwene stared into the stone, doing her best to empty her mind. *Drift.* Another flash. Egwene tried to conjure the feeling of floating in one of the backwater pools down the Winespring Water, the feeling of the sun on her body, mind free of thoughts. *Drift.* She looked at the stone. Another flash, and another. *Drift.* Soon it pulsed with light like the beating of a heart. *Drift.* She thought she felt... something. One last, feeble flicker, and the stone was but a stone again. Egwene stared for a while before realizing it would not flash again. *Is that all?* She looked up at Moiraine Sedai.

“Maybe—” she started. “Maybe you were mistaken. I thought I felt something, but it was gone so quickly. I must have imagined it. I-I’m sorry I wasted your time.”

“I have wasted nothing, child.” The hint of a smile touched Moiraine Sedai’s lips. “That last light was yours alone.”

“It was? Me? But I hardly felt anything at all. And that flash, it was so small.”

“Now you prove yourself foolish, girl. Most who come to Tar Valon must study for months before they can do what you just did. You have tremendous talent, I think. You will go far— with study and hard work.”

Egwene smiled, then furrowed her brow. “But— I don’t want to seem a fool, but shouldn’t the feeling have been... stronger?”

“It was but your first time, and you did not know the way. When you gain more control, you will feel the Power more strongly, more precisely, more consistently. You will be able to tell the Five Powers apart, and be able to weave them together. And you will learn which Powers you are strong in and in which you are weak.”

“Five Powers? I thought it was the One Power?”

“Just as the One Power has a male half and a female half, so it has five strands, five currents: Earth, Water, Fire, Wind, and Spirit. To channel the One Power is to weave these threads together in different combinations and arrangements. You will find that you are strong in one or two of the Powers. Three if you are lucky. In others you will be idling, or weak. Women tend to have more strength in Water and Wind. In the Age of Legends, men favored Earth and Fire.”

“Earth, Wind, Fire, Water, and Spirit,” Egwene said slowly. “It doesn’t seem fair that men should have been strongest in the strongest Powers.”

Moiraine Sedai laughed. “Think you so, 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, playing idly with her braid. “They— they were the ones 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 Sedai said. “You doubt your own choice.”

“No,” Egwene protested. “I’m not afraid. I do want to become an Aes Sedai.”

“There is no fault in fear, child. Only in letting it rule you. You have not done so yet, and would surprise me greatly by doing so now. Still, you 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 mad, 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.”

“Of course, Aes Sedai.” *But it has already changed everything.* Egwene smiled. “Can we try with the stone again?”



Rand was sore. Between riding during the day, sword lessons at night, and a sleepless spell he couldn’t seem to kick, his entire body felt threadbare. He stared blankly at his supper of flatbread and cheese and dried meat. It was evening, which meant tea instead of water, but Rand still found it hard to get excited about eating the same meal he’d had twelve times in four days. He tore off another chunk of meat and chewed slowly, looking around at the camp.

Mat sat on a log with the gleeman, working on his juggling. He was already near enough expert with a quarterstaff, so he spent as much time hanging around Thom Merrill as he did learning from Lan. Thom wasn’t keen on revealing many of a gleeman’s trade secrets, but he saw no harm in teaching Mat some simple juggling. Mat was really rather good at it, too. Perrin was off by himself, whittling again. When they weren’t riding or taking their

lessons, Perrin had knife and wood in hand. Rand had wondered what he was making; it didn't look like anything to Rand, but he didn't say so.

As for Egwene, she was eating slowly and quietly by herself, hood still up, while the Aes Sedai and warder held their nightly two-person council away from the camp. Not until dark fell and the men took to their blankets would Egwene and Moiraine Sedai go aside for tonight's lesson. *How did you get so far away from me?* Last week, Egwene would have been his first choice for company, over anyone else he knew. When they were together, he didn't feel a world apart from the village. He felt like he *belonged*, even if they were sneaking around. But that feeling was gone, and he didn't know how to get it back. They had been unable to find a way past that stupid fight on the ferry. Then she started taking these lessons with the Aes Sedai— wanted to *become* an Aes Sedai. Rand could see her changing before his eyes, and now he felt farther from her than from anyone else in the group.

Without Egwene, he had no one to talk to here, no one he would call a friend. Not for the first time, he missed Father. Not for the first time, he found himself surprised. He had spent so much time being angry at Father — for raising him so far from the village, for being so different from other Two Rivers men, even for marrying an outlander woman. Now he just wanted to see him, talk to him, laugh at his odd jokes.

But Father isn't here. Rand took his last bite of food and last swallow of tea and walked over to Egwene.

“Gwennie,” he said, “I thought maybe we could— ”

Egwene pulled back her hood and ran her fingers through her hair.

“Blood and ashes, what are you doing?” He spoke in a forceful whisper, afraid he would scream his words if he did not rein them in hard.

She looked up at him with a furrowed brow. “What do you mean, Rand?”

And now we play games. “You know just what I say. All your life you've waited to wear the braid, and now you walk around with your hair as loose

as a baby's. Why? Because *she* doesn't braid *hers*?"

"Aes Sedai don't braid their hair," she said simply, standing up. "At least, not unless they want to." She started walking away, deeper into the wood.

Rand followed. He saw Mat and the gleeman look their way but ignored them. "You're not Aes Sedai. You're Egwene al' Vere from Emond's Field. What would the Women's Circle say if they saw you like this?"

"Women's Circle business is none of yours, Rand al' Thor," she said without stopping. "And I *will* be an Aes Sedai. Just as soon as I reach Tar Valon."

"As soon as you reach Tar Valon." Rand heard his voice becoming louder and more strained. "You would throw away the village so easily? You *know* what I would give to be a part of Emond's Field the way you are. The way you are without even trying. And you cast it aside, for what? To be Aes Sedai? Why? You've heard the stories."

"Why?" Egwene turned around to face him. Her voice rose now, too. "Because Aes Sedai are strong, they help people, I mean, the things they can do. They touch the world in ways I didn't even know were possible."

"Touch the world? Like sinking the ferry?"

"Sinking the— ? Like hiding us in fog when the draghkar was chasing us. Like— like calling lightning down against the trollocs that were killing our friends and neighbors. *Like saving your father*. I mean, 'sinking the ferry'?"

"This— this isn't you." *Have you changed so much in a few days?* "The Mayor's daughter wouldn't just turn her back on what it means to be an Emond's Fielder."

"Are you serious right now? Do you hear yourself? I'm talking about what it means to be alive, to be human, to be a woman. You're talking about my hair. Tell me, was the braid that important to you when you ran your fingers through my hair? When you tugged at it? When you buried your face in the smell of it?"

Rand stood moving his jaw but found no words.

“What is wrong with you, Rand?” She grabbed a bit of her hair and held it up to him. “How is *this* what breaks this silence between us? Four days on the road, and the only time you’re not ignoring me is when you are chastising me. Why? What is it? What do you want from me, Rand?”

“I want— I want— ”

“What?!”

“I want *home*.” Rand felt the blood fever in his face. He clenched his fists and concentrated on not shouting. “I want to shear the sheep and milk the cow. I want Winternight and Bel Tine— normal Festival. Drink cider with my father and put flowers on my mother’s grave.” Rand took a moment to catch his breath. *I didn’t put flowers on Mother’s grave.* He felt a little dizzy. *How did it take me four days to realize I didn’t put flowers on Mother’s grave?* Egwene stood silent, her mouth slightly open. *Bollocks.* “I want— I want you to— to want the same things, too. I don’t want you to love this stupid adventure. I don’t want you to leave Emond’s Field for Tar Valon. I want you to go home with me as soon as it’s safe. I want you to tell your parents— ”

And Egwene’s mouth was on his. She pushed him against a tree, then pulled him to the ground. She had leaves in her hair and dirt on her cheek, but he had never seen her more beautiful. He kissed her, hard at first, and biting at her lip the way she liked. Then slower, wetter. He tucked her hair behind her ear, then ran his fingers through it. *It is nice loose.* He kissed her under her chin, on her neck. She moaned and put her hands under his coat, on the small of his back. Her fingers were beneath his shirt. Her hands warm on his skin, rubbing from his belt to his shoulders and back again. Her fingers curled and her nails dug in lightly. He wrapped his fingers in her hair and made a fist, pulling lightly when he squeezed.

“Rand.”

“Gwennie.”

He smelled sweat and horse on her, but underneath she smelled like Emond's Field. Her hands were in his hair now, grabbing and pulling. He lifted his head to look at her. When their eyes met, she closed hers tight and turned her head, pulling him down by his hair, down to her chest. *What? What am I supposed—?* The square-cut neck of her dress left her bare from shoulder to shoulder, from her underarm up. He kissed her there but that wasn't what she wanted. She let go of his head, hooked her thumbs under the neckline of her dress, and pulled down.

Rand didn't move for a moment. She had never done this before, and he was unsure what to do next. Egwene grabbed his head again and pushed him down. He took her nipple in his mouth and sucked lightly. Egwene moaned and he brought his hand up, rubbing and squeezing one breast while he sucked and nibbled on the other. He liked it, but he also felt clumsy.

"I've missed you," he said.

She murmured something he couldn't make out. Rand moved up to kiss her on the mouth.

"No more fighting," he said, looking into her eyes.

"No more fighting," she agreed.

He kissed her eyes and cheeks and mouth. "No more fighting. We get through this together and we'll be home before we know it."

Egwene pulled back, then pushed Rand up by his shoulders. "Rand, I'm *not* going home. I'm going to Tar Valon. I will be Aes Sedai."

"Then why—you just heard me say—why would you kiss me when I just said what I said?"

"I don't know," she said. "It wasn't because you had convinced me to—I mean, I did it because I wanted to. It felt... right."

“It felt— ”

“Egwene.” Egwene gave a little yelp. Moiraine Sedai was five paces away, looking down on them. Egwene pushed Rand off of her with her knee while pulling her dress back up. Whatever Moiraine Sedai thought at finding them, it did not show on her face. “It is time for your lesson. If you are done here?”

“Of course, Moiraine Sedai.” Egwene stood up and brushed herself off. Moiraine Sedai turned and started back toward camp. Egwene looked at Rand. Her eyebrows were furrowed, and her lips pressed together. She was trying to say something without words, but Rand didn’t know what. It had been hard enough to understand her when she said what she was thinking.

Egwene ran off after Moiraine Sedai. Rand fell back to the ground and looked up through the trees. He closed his eyes and remembered the sharp smell of her sweat, the feel of her unbraided hair, and the spice and salt of her skin.

She’s not coming home.

“It’s been a week, and he’s found naught but nothing.” Mat was tired of the road, and anxious to start moving faster.

“Nothing *yet*,” Perrin said. “Besides, we don’t know that. You think she tells us everything he says when he comes back?”

“No,” said Mat, “not likely, that.”

Lan rode ahead with Moiraine Sedai, reporting on what he had found. He was just back from another ride scouting ahead for ambushes, or checking

their trail for pursuit. Mat didn't know which, but he was willing to bet the search had been fruitless. It had been the same since they crossed the Taren.

"He ain't found nothing," Mat said. "It's been a week."

"Feels like forever," Perrin said.

"I think we lost them."

"And what if we did? What if we ain't? What would you change?"

"I say we're worrying too much about trollocs and such. Let's get on already, start really seeing the world. This is where the stories come from. What do you think a real city is like?"

"We'll find out soon enough," said Perrin. "We're going to Baerlon."

"Baerlon's all very well, but I've seen Master al' Vere's old map. 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.

"What's so— ? Think of the Hunt. The Horn! Can you— Look!"

They had caught up with Lan and Moiraine Sedai atop a low hill. Below them, stark trees cast the long shadows of early evening, stretching east toward the horizon. A mile away stood a log wall, nearly twenty feet tall, with wooden watchtowers scattered along its length. Beyond the wall, rooftops of slate and tile glinted in the late afternoon sun, and twisted threads of smoke drifted upward from chimneys. Hundreds of chimneys. Mat didn't see a single thatched roof. 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 wall. Farms lay scattered about the town, thickest to the north while only a few broke the forest to the south, but Mat hardly saw them. *It's bigger than Emond's Field and Watch Hill and Deven Ride all put together. Maybe Taren Ferry, too.*

“So that’s a city.” Egwene had caught up, along with the gleeman. Al’ Thor was not far behind, riding alone as usual. “How can so many people live in one place?”

“City!” said Thom Merrilin, shaking his head.

“And you, Rand?” Moiraine Sedai said. “What do you think of your first sight of Baerlon?”

“I think—” he said. “I think it’s a long way from home.”

Moiraine Sedai nodded. “Yes, you might. But it is not. You have a long way yet to get to Tar Valon. Your journey is just beginning.” She paused and ran her eyes over the boys. “And bored as you might feel after a day or two of calm, we will not be distracted from our destination. As eager as you might be to run off to Illian and forget about trollocs, and halfmen, and draghkar, I will see you to Tar Valon. Believe it. The Dark One is after you three, one or all, and if I let you go running off wherever you want to go, it 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.”

Her voice was flat. Matter-of-fact. *She’d do it.* Mat looked at al’ Thor and Perrin, but they kept their heads down, unwilling to make eye contact. *How did she know what we were talking about?* He locked eyes with Egwene, whose eyebrows were furrowed in surprise, and fear, and a clear but vain desire to reassure him.

“Yes, much farther to go yet,” Moiraine Sedai said. “But there is nothing else to be done. Come, children.”

She eased her mare down the hill. She didn’t look back to see if they followed. Lan did not move. Apparently he would bring up the rear. Thom Merrilin was the first to start down the hill. Mat and Egwene followed, and the rest came down behind.

Moiraine Sedai must have been walking slowly, for soon enough they caught up to her.

“The danger begins again here,” she said without looking at them. “Watch what you say within those walls. We must attract as little attention as possible. Above all, do not mention trollocs, or halfmen, or any such. Or Aes Sedai. Here, Lan and I do not even go by our own names. I am known as Alys, and he is Andra. Remember that well. Now, let us be within the walls before night catches us. The gates of Baerlon are closed from sundown to sunrise.”

No one said any more as they continued down the hill. Lan exchanged his cloak of shifting greys and greens for one of dark brown. It was more ordinary, but still nicer than anything Mat’s da owned. Along the road they passed half a dozen farms. None lay close, and none of the people finishing their chores seemed to notice the travelers. Soon they arrived at heavy wooden gates bound with wide straps of black iron. They were closed tight, though the sun still shone.

Lan walked his stallion right up to the wall and tugged on a frayed rope hanging down beside the gates. A bell clanged on the other side of the wall. An old man popped his wrinkled and weathered face out from between two of the logs that made up the wall. He glared at them with eyes half closed.

“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 Sedai’s mare took a few steps forward, giving the man a clear view of her face as she looked up. His wrinkles deepened in a gap-toothed smile. “I didn’t know it was you, mistress. Wait. I’ll be right down. Just wait. I’m coming. I’m coming.”

The man dipped his head out of sight, but Mat still heard muffled shouts for them to stay where they were, that he was coming. With a slow and grating creak, the right-hand gate slowly swung open just wide enough for one horse to pass through. The gatekeeper poked his head into the gap, flashed his half-toothless smile at them again and darted back out of the way. Moiraine Sedai followed Lan through, with Egwene right behind her.

Mat looked at Perrin, shrugged, and trotted Cloud through the gate. On the other side was a narrow street lined with high wooden fences and tall, windowless warehouses. Moiraine Sedai and Lan were already on foot, speaking to the wrinkle-faced gatekeeper. The rest followed suit as they made it through the gate.

The little man wore a much-mended cloak and coat and a cloth cap he held crumpled in his hands. He watched those dismounting behind Lan and Moiraine Sedai and grinned. “Why, Mistress Alys, you taken up collecting downcountry folk with hay in their hair?” He noticed Thom Merrilin, then. “You ain’t a sheepfarmer. I let you through some days back, I did. They didn’t care for 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 quickly as the gleeman with his juggling balls or daggers. “I ain’t told nobody, and I won’t, neither. Not even those Whitecloak bast— I mean, not even those Whitecloaks.”

Children of the Light. Mat had heard stories about the Children from peddlers and merchants and merchants’ guards. The tales varied from reverent to hateful, but all agreed that the Children despised Aes Sedai as much as they did darkfriends. *Is this more trouble already?*

“The Children are in Baerlon?” Lan asked.

“They surely are.” The gatekeeper bobbed his head. “Came the same day you left, as I recall.”

“Have they said why they are here?” asked Moiraine Sedai.

“Why they’re here, mistress? Of course, they— Oh, I forget. You been downcountry. Well, they say they’re here because the Dragon’s down in Ghealdan. Or him as calls himself Dragon. They say the fellow’s stirring up

evil, which I expect he is. Say they're come to stamp it out. Only he's in Ghealdan, not here. Just an excuse to meddle in other people's business, is what I figure. I've already seen the Dragon's Fang on some people's doors."

"Have they caused much trouble, then?" Lan asked.

"No, no," said Avin, shaking his head vigorously. "Governor won't let but maybe ten or so inside the walls at one time. He don't trust them, neither. Still, I wish they'd move on to Ghealdan."

"No doubt that would be best," said Lan.

"And what do you hear of the troubles there, Master Avin?" asked Moiraine Sedai. "I have heard that Aes Sedai were going to Ghealdan."

"Yes, yes. They went alright. They say some of those Aes Sedai are dead, maybe all of them. This one, some say he's true genuine." The gatekeeper lowered his voice. "The Dragon Reborn. They say he can do things, use the One Power. There's thousands following him, so I hear."

"Fool's talk," Lan said.

Avin ducked his head and hid behind his crumpled cap.

"I'm only saying what I heard, ain't I? Just what I heard, Master Andra."

"Do not be upset, Master Avin," said Moiraine Sedai. "We are always glad for the news you have to share. Now, though, I fear we must be going. It will be dark soon."

"Course, course. And don't you worry, mistress. I ain't seen nobody." Avin 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."

Moiraine Sedai smiled. "Good evening, Master Avin."

She led them away from the gate, then. Mat looked back once and saw Avin standing in front of the gate, polishing a coin with the edge of his cloak and chuckling.

The way led through dirt streets four or five paces wide, empty of people, all lined with warehouses and occasional high, wooden fences. After a few turns onto other streets that looked no different, Lan stopped by a section of head-high wooden fence exactly like a dozen others they had passed. He worked the blade of his dagger between two of the boards, pulled, and a length of the fence swung out like a gate. In fact, it was a gate, though one that opened only from the other side. When it opened, Mat saw the metal latch that Lan had lifted with his dagger on the other side.

Moiraine Sedai went through immediately, drawing her mare behind her. Lan motioned the others to follow and brought up the rear, closing the gate behind him.

The gate led into the stableyard of an inn. A massive inn. It would have been twice the size of the Winespring Inn had it, too, been two storeys tall. But it was *four* storeys tall. Most of the windows were aglow in the deepening twilight. *What is this city that could have so many strangers in it?* Mat whistled through his teeth.

“Here! Here! You can’t come in that way! You’ll have to go round the front!”

Three men in dirty canvas aprons stood in the stable’s broad, arched doors. It was a wiry fellow shouting at them, waving his arms. Lan’s hand went to his purse, but even as it did another man, as wide as he was tall, came hurrying out of the inn. Puffs of hair stuck out above his ears, and his sparkling white apron named him the innkeeper.

“It’s alright, Mutch,” the man said. “It’s alright. These folk are expected guests. Take care of their horses, now. Good care.”

Mutch scowled and knuckled his forehead, then motioned his two companions to help him. Mat and the others hurriedly got their saddlebags

and blanketrolls down while the innkeeper turned to Moiraine Sedai. He gave her a deep bow and 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 and— ho!” 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 Sedai said.

“Oh, yes!” said Egwene. Mat stayed quiet but nodded his head in agreement.

“Baths?” the innkeeper said. “Why, just the best and the hottest in town. Come. Welcome to The Stag and Lion. Welcome to Baerlon.”

First Night in Baerlon

Perrin couldn't see through the mist, and he didn't want to. This was no cold fog conjured by an Aes Sedai. This... this was honey, and the Sunday sun, and his baby sister's morning laugh.

"Need anything else?"

Perrin sat up. He had forgotten about Ara. The ceiling may have been completely hidden in the steam, but Perrin could just see the boy on the stool he had taken up after bringing the soap, dippers, and buckets of hot water. Perrin and the rest—Rand, Mat, and the old gleeman—had long since lathered, scrubbed, and rinsed themselves free of a week of grime. Now they were soaking in four of the dozen large copper tubs in the bath chamber, letting the heat loosen tight muscles and release bones from a chill that had come to seem permanent. All the while Ara had sat on his stool, quiet. "More towels? More hot water?"

"Nothing, nothing at all," the gleeman said. The steam made his voice seem to come from nowhere and everywhere at once. "Go enjoy your 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 Perrin's axe, and to Rand's sword. "Is there trouble downcountry, too?" he said. "In the Rivers, or whatever you call it?"

"The *Two* Rivers," Mat said. "It's the *Two* Rivers. As for trouble, why—"

“What do you mean, ‘too’?” asked Perrin. “Is there some kind of trouble here?”

Thom Merrillin raised himself back up a little and opened his eyes.

“Here?” Ara asked. “Trouble? Miners having fistfights in the streets in the dark of the morning ain’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 mean it’s quiet down there. Still, 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, ain’t it?” His mouth hung open for a moment after he had finished, then he snapped it shut.

Perrin had tensed at the word *trollocs*, but relaxed when he realized Ara did not mean the ones who had attacked Emond’s Field. No, trollocs in the Borderlands was hardly news at all.

“Trollocs?” Mat asked, his head still lolling over the back of his tub. “Oy. Don’t get me started about trollocs.”

“Please, no one get him started,” the gleeman said. His words were ice, even in the steam of the bath chamber. “I am a little tired of hearing my own stories back from him.”

Mat sat up, looking first confused and then chagrined.

Ara stared at them all for what seemed a long moment. Then he turned to the gleeman. “This your prentice? You gonna perform?”

“Ha! Prentice? I— ” The door banged open before Master Merrillin could finish. Lan walked in, brown cloak slung over one shoulder, along with a gust of cooler air that thinned the mist briefly.

“Well,” he 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 boy's protests, and shut the door tight behind him. He waited there a moment, his head cocked close to the door. When he turned back, his eyes stabbed at Mat. "It's a good thing I got back when I did, farm boy. Don't you listen to what you are told?"

"I-I ain't—" Mat said. "I was just— The trollocs..." He trailed off and leaned back in the face of Lan's stare.

"Don't talk about trollocs," Lan said. "Don't even think about them." He started filling a tub for himself. "It's a fair thing that no one is in here to hear your foolishness. Luck on us, with the inn so full. Blood and ashes, you had best remember that the Dark One has eyes and ears where you least expect. And if the Children of the Light heard about what was chasing you, they'd be burning to get their hands on you. To them, it would be as much as name you darkfriend. You may not be used to it, but this is how it is. Keep your trust small unless Mistress Alys or I tell you differently."

"There was something that fellow wouldn't tell us," Perrin said. Rand nodded in his tub. "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 didn't know you well enough to risk saying so. For all he knew, you'd go running to the Whitecloaks."

This is what it is to be surrounded by strangers.

"He said there were trollocs in... in Saldaea, wasn't it?" Rand said.

Lan hurled his empty bucket to the floor with a crash. "You will talk about it, won't you? Believe me, that is no news in Saldaea, shepherder. Just you put it in the front of your mind that we want no more attention than mice in a field. Concentrate on that. Mistress Alys wants to get you all to Tar Valon alive, and I will do it if it can be done, but should you bring her any harm..."

They finished their baths in silence, and said nothing while getting dressed, either.

When they left the bath chamber, Moiraine Sedai was standing at the end of the hall with a slender girl not much taller than herself. At least, Perrin thought it was a girl, though her dark hair was cut short and she wore a man's shirt and trousers. Moiraine Sedai said something, and the girl gave a quick glance toward the men, then nodded and hurried away.

"Well, now," Moiraine Sedai 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 as she turned to lead the way, about their rooms and the crowding in the town, and how the innkeeper hoped Master Merrilin would favor the common room with some music and a story or two. She never mentioned the girl.

The private dining room had a polished oak table with a dozen chairs around it, and a thick rug on the floor. Egwene sat warming her hands at the fire crackling on the hearth, her freshly gleaming hair combed out around her shoulders. She turned to face them as they entered. Perrin took a chair; Mat and Rand did the same.

Master Fitch bustled in then, followed by four girls 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 girls began setting the table immediately, while the innkeeper bowed to Moiraine Sedai.

"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 hens, and some turnips and chickpeas, with a little cheese for after. No, it just isn't what it should be. I truly do apologize."

"A feast." Moiraine Sedai smiled. "For these troubled times, a feast indeed, Master Fitch."

Perrin agreed. The hens smelled amazing. He recognized thyme and rosemary, basil and garlic, and salt of course. He was sure there were more spices, but he couldn't name them. Rand's eyes brightened before he closed them and inhaled deeply. Perrin chuckled and looked at Mat, but he was busy chatting up one of the serving girls.

The innkeeper bowed again. "My thanks, Mistress Alys. My thanks." As he straightened, he frowned and tugged his apron flat. "It isn't what I would have laid before you a year ago, of course. Not nearly. The winter. Yes. The winter. Empty cellars and empty farms. Well." He looked at Moiraine Sedai and smiled. "But it's not so harsh in your company, Mistress Alys. Mari, Cinda, let these good people eat in peace." He waved the girls out of the room, then turned and bowed once more. "I hope you enjoy your meal, Mistress Alys. If you need anything else, just speak it, and I will fetch it. Just you speak it." 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 strode over to the door and pressed his ear to it. He stood that way for a goody thirty seconds, then open the door and stuck his head into the hall. "They're gone," he said, and closed the door.

"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 said. "But then, until we reach Tar Valon, I suspect everyone. There, I'll suspect only half."

Perrin started to smile, thinking it a joke. But Lan's face showed not a trace of humor. *He really will suspect people in Tar Valon. Is anywhere safe?*

"He exaggerates," Moiraine Sedai said. "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. Still, I have warded this room against anyone

who might try to listen. We should be safe for the moment. Come, let us be seated before our meal gets cold.”

They took places around the table, with Moiraine Sedai 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 Sedai asked, “What did you learn in the common room?” Knives and forks stopped moving and all eyes turned to the warder.

“Little that’s good,” he said. “Avin was right, at least as far as talk has it. There was a battle in Ghealdan, and Logain the victor. A dozen different stories are floating about, but they all agree on that.” Lan paused. “It seems Avin may also have been right about Logain’s followers. Some say they number in the thousands, and call themselves the People of the Dragon.”

Moiraine Sedai nodded. The gleeman groaned. *Logain must be the false Dragon. But what are the People of the Dragon?*

“And my sisters?” Moiraine Sedai asked quietly, and Lan shook his head.

“I don’t know. Some say they were all killed, some say none. Some even say they went over to Logain. There’s nothing reliable, and I did not care to show too much interest.”

“Yes,” Moiraine Sedai said, looking at her hands. “Little that is good.” She took a deep breath and 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 Sedai said. “That agrees with what the bath maid said. Gossip does have its points. Now,” she said, addressing 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.” Perrin broke into a wide grin; so did Mat and Egwene. Even Rand was smiling. The corners of Moiraine Sedai’s mouth twitched up for just a moment. “What does Master Andra say to that?” she asked.

Lan eyed the grinning faces without expression. “Well enough, if they remember what I’ve told them for a change.”

The gleeman blew through his mustaches. “These country folk loose in a . . . a city.” He chuckled and shook his head.

“Very well,” said Moiraine Sedai. “Let us adjourn to the common room, or to our chambers. Get your rest.” She smiled at the gleeman. “Tomorrow is your first day in a city.”

Now that the weather had cleared just a little, the inn was packed full of men from the mines, and smelters, and mountain men come running away from wolves and worse. Master Fitch begged Moiraine Sedai’s pardon, and Lan’s too, but he had just three rooms for all of them. Mat and Perrin were in the smallest. Egwene and Moiraine Sedai were in the largest. The other room went to Rand, Lan, and the gleeman.

Perrin and Mat’s room was at the back of the third floor, close up under the overhanging eaves. Perrin looked out the room’s only window on the stableyard. Full night had fallen, and light from the inn made a pool outside. He sat on his bed; it was hard. Not as hard as the rocky ground between the Two Rivers and Baerlon, but hard. Through the door of his room he saw Thom Merrill dashing back downstairs with his flute and his harp. Lan went with him, and Rand was right behind. Mat would already be down there; he had never even bothered to come upstairs.

Perrin lay back on his bed. A week ago, he would have tripped over himself racing downstairs for just the chance to see a gleeman, for just the rumor of it. But he had heard Thom Merrill tell his stories every night for a week, and would surely have another chance tomorrow night, and the next. The

hot bath had untied the knots in his muscles, and his first hot meal in a week had left him languid and lazy. He heard a muffled shout from below. *No doubt Thom Merrill has arrived in the common room.* Perrin wondered which song the gleeman would play first, but he was asleep before the first note.

The village was abandoned. No, not *abandoned*. Just *empty*. Perrin could tell that people lived there. He just didn't see any of them. None. A row of houses ran alongside the road. He ducked his head into a few as he walked, but they were all empty. No one was in the large meadow to his right, either. After a hundred paces or so, right around where the meadow ended, he came to a small crossroads. To the left lay more houses and what looked to be farmland. To the right a small wooden bridge crossed over a stream that ran parallel to the road. Ahead the road dwindled away in front of a few houses that sat right on the bank of the stream. Perrin crossed the bridge to his right and found himself before an inn.

I know this place.

He climbed the short stairway up to the porch, then opened the front door. The common room was cold and empty. A fire burned in the hearth, large and bright, but didn't seem to be giving off any heat. The light from the flames was odd, too. It did not seem to match the shadows in the room. Wherever Perrin looked, the light was clear and bright, as he would expect from such a large blaze. But the rest of the room, seen fleetingly from the corner of his eye, was cast in seething shadows that seemed greasy and baleful and mean.

Perrin walked all the way to the other end of the room, looking and listening for any sign of another person. The quiet was absolute. He went through the door at the far end of the common room and walked into a kitchen. No one was there, and he saw nothing cooking. A door at the back

of the kitchen opened up on a courtyard area with a massive oak tree growing in the middle of it. *In the summer, there will be benches and tables set in the shade of that tree. People will sit playing stones, drinking basement ale, and trading jokes and stories.* He didn't know how he knew that, but he knew he was right.

He reached out to open the door, then pulled his hand back. Something had moved in the common room behind him. He went back to see what it was, but found the room as empty as it had been a moment before. *I know I heard something.* He saw stairs to his left and raced up them. He searched guest rooms and what looked like family bedrooms but found no one. After checking the entire floor twice, he headed back down to the common room.

Perrin stopped at the bottom of the stairs. A man sat at a table near the fireplace, leaning back in his chair and drinking from a mug he held in both hands. *Where did he come from?* The stranger smiled and beckoned for Perrin to join him. Perrin paused, then closed the distance in three long strides and sat down.

The man was dressed all in white, save for a long plum scarf that hung from his neck down to his waist. His coat and shirt were simple, but clearly of fine cut. Perrin looked from the man's clothes up to his face, and started. He had never seen such light eyes, closer to the color of clouds than that of the sky. He would have thought the man blind, but his gaze held too much life and amusement.

"So we meet again," the man said. "Face to face, at last."

Again? Perrin tried to remember. He was *sure* he had been in this place before, but this man did not look familiar. Perrin looked more closely at his face. He looked to be ten or fifteen years older than Perrin, still young but by no means a boy. Wavy black hair, just beginning to grey, framed high cheekbones and a full mouth, bent in a half smile. *My sisters would go weak-kneed for this guy.* The stranger chuckled and Perrin's breath caught. For the briefest moment, the man's mouth and eyes seemed to become openings into endless caverns of flame.

Before Perrin could even think to stand back up, the flames were gone. The man sat there, just as before, wearing a warm, amused smile. Perrin surveyed the room, trying to place it in his memory. He could not. He looked at the stranger again. His eyes remained eyes, and his mouth a mouth, but Perrin could not get the image of those fires out of his mind. *A flight of fancy, surely.*

“This is a dream,” Perrin said. He tried to slow his breath and quiet his mind.

“Is it?” 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.

This time Perrin let out a shout and sprang to his feet. “A nightmare,” he said, backpedaling as fast as he could. “Nothing more.” He turned and dashed to the front of the room, throwing the door open and vaulting through. On the other side, he did not find the bridge and the crossroads that he expected. Instead, he leapt into the very room he was trying to escape, as though he were entering the inn from the outside. There sat the man, with his white clothes and plum scarf, his tea and his light eyes, smiling at Perrin.

“Come now,” the stranger said. “You should know that freedom is not had so easily.”

Perrin took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and thought about waking up. As a child, the Wisdom had told him that this would end any nightmare. He counted to three and opened his eyes. The Wisdom was wrong.

This is a dream. It must be. He backed toward the door again, this time keeping his eyes trained on the stranger by the fireplace. He reached the door and tried the handle. It did not move; the door was locked.

“You look thirsty,” the man said. “Drink.”

A goblet sat on the table, shining gold and ornamented with rubies and amethysts. *Where did that come from?* The man still sipped tea from his simple, ceramic mug. *Only a dream.* Perrin's mouth felt like dust.

"I am, a little," he said, picking up the goblet. The man leaned back in his chair, his smile widening. The smell of spiced wine drove home just how thirsty Perrin was, as if he'd had nothing to drink in days. *Have I?*

With the wine halfway to his mouth, he stopped. Whispers of smoke were rising from the arm of the chair, where the man rested his hand. And those eyes watched him so sharply, flickering in and out of flames.

Perrin licked his lips and put the wine back on the table without drinking. "I'm not as thirsty as I thought." The stranger's smile failed for just a moment, but it was enough to convince Perrin that he was right not to drink. *I wonder what's in the wine.* That was a foolish question, of course. This was all a dream. *Then why won't it stop?*

"Did they promise you glory?" the man asked, his smile back and confident again. "Power? Did they say you would open the Eye of the World? You should know, old friend: puppets gain no glory. They have you on strings that have been centuries in the weaving. The White Tower chose your father, like a stallion, roped and led to his business. Your mother just a brood mare. It is all in the Tower's plan. And that plan leads to your death."

Old friend? The more the man spoke, the more confused Perrin became.

"My— my parents have never had dealings with Aes Sedai," said Perrin. "You're stark mad, you are. I crave no glory, nor to open any eyes but my own. I ain't in no one's plans. You've mistaken me, I'm afraid."

The man chuckled again. When flames rose in the man's eyes and mouth this time, Perrin thought he could hear them roar. "Perhaps, perhaps. You may be the one, and you may not. It is not yet certain. Whether you are or no, you cannot hide it from me forever. I know you down to the smallest hair. And if I have *not* mistaken you, if you *are* the one, you may find

yourself seeking help in cutting those marionette's lines. If that day comes, you should look to me. For who knows how better than I?"

The man's smile faded away. His next words held none of the levity Perrin had come to expect from him. "Hear me now, my friend. Beware. Be cautious. The Amyrlin Seat will use you until you are consumed, just as she did Davian before you, and Yurian Stonebow. Guaire Amalasan and Raolin Darksbane. Just as she uses Logain today. She'll not stop until there is nothing left of you."

"Who—" Perrin started, understanding less than ever. "Who are you?"

"Like you, I go by many names," the man answered. That wasn't right. Perrin had only one name. "For now, you may call me Væ'alza."

The Dark One.

Perrin froze. He felt panic rushing in. His thoughts spun round and round until they landed on the mantra he knew as well as his own name. He forced the words out, his voice growing stronger as he went. "Y-you are bound—bound in Shayol Ghul. You and all the Forsaken... bound by the Creator until the end of time."

"Is that what you think?" the man said softly, laughing his fiery laugh. "Silly boy, I have never been bound. My kiss gave Lews Therin Kinslayer the moment of sanity to know what his arrogance had cost him. I was there when he fell to his own frailty, broken under the weight of his crimes. It was no accident when he called the One Power down on himself until it split the earth and reared up Dragonmount to mark his tomb.

"A thousand years later I sent the trollocs south in force. Over the course of three centuries, those simple creatures undid Tar Valon's Compact of the Ten Nations. More of Asur than ever were free of Aes Sedai control.

"When Artur Hawkwing ruled all of Asur, I whispered in his ear and Aes Sedai the length and breadth of the land paid for their manipulations with

their lives. The High King sought my counsel even on his deathbed. His last words were to cry that Tar Valon must be destroyed.

“I’ve done much since I was ‘bound’ in Shayol Ghul. But I regret that I have not done enough to keep Tar Valon from scheming to control you, nor to prevent those schemes from bearing fruit. But we speak now, and it is not too late. Come with me and you can be free. Turn your back on me and dance on Aes Sedai strings until you die.”

“No, this is a dream,” Perrin said. His words sounded weak and bloodless, even to his own ears. “It is a dream.”

“Do you think that makes it safe?” Væ’alza asked. “Dreams can be as dangerous as the waking world. Watch.”

He clucked softly and three rats came scurrying from somewhere in the inn. They all sat up in front of him, with their tiny paws up. They seemed to be waiting, though Perrin knew not for what. Then Væ’alza reached down and picked up the rat to his right. He petted it between the ears, clucking again, then grabbed its head and twisted its neck until Perrin heard the nauseous twist of bones breaking and blood rushing where it shouldn’t. The other two rats still waited patiently, though it was not long before they suffered the same fate as the first.

Perrin stood frozen, looking at the rats’ bodies, now discarded on the common room floor. “Anything can happen in a dream,” he mumbled. He felt himself backing toward the door again, though he made no conscious effort to do so.

“Yes, anything can. Remember that, and be careful. Me, I will see you safe if I can, old friend. But that will depend on you. Will you let me keep you safe? Or will you put your faith in the Aes Sedai, instead? Go on, if you are so inclined. Go to the White Tower and tell them. Tell the Amyrlin Seat of this, this dream.” The man chuckled. Again the fiery eyes and mouth. Perrin thought he 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 you. But will they let you live, to spread the tale of what they do? Are you

foolish enough to believe so? The ashes of many like you are scattered on the slopes of Dragonmount.”

“This is a dream,” Perrin said. His breath was short, but he couldn’t slow it down. “It’s a dream. I’ll wake up any second now.”

“Will you?” asked Væ’alza. “Will it matter if you do? Is anyone ever really free of his dreams?”



Perrin sat up. He was in a bed. *The inn. Baerlon.* He wiped his sweaty hair from his forehead and looked around. It was still the dead of night. He heard Mat say something, but when he looked over, his friend was just muttering to himself in his sleep and tossing about in the covers. A few coals still glowed lightly in the hearth, but the room was cold.

Perrin moved back on the bed and sat up against the wall. He pulled his knees up, wrapped the blanket around his shoulders, and stared out the window into the night. He closed his eyes and listened to Mat’s jumble of half-swallowed nonsense. *Nothing to say what he’s dreaming, but it can’t be worse than the one I just had.* Perrin counted to a hundred in his head, then to two hundred by twos, to three hundred by threes, and so on. He was well past a thousand before sleep came again. He was still sitting up, knees to chest, blanket around his shoulders.

A City to See

Dawn was just breaking, and the room was more shadows than light. Mat lay there, cold and hungry, feeling like he had spent the night in a tree instead of a bed. He tried to go back to sleep, but he knew it wouldn't work. He *felt* it, a crawling anxiety in his skin and at the base of his neck. It was as if his body had gotten a taste of sleep during the night and didn't want any more. *I don't suppose I can blame it. I wouldn't want seconds of that dish.*

Across the room, Perrin was still asleep— though he must have awoken at some point because he was sitting up, wrapped in his blanket, head lolling back against the wall. It looked awkward and uncomfortable, but it was sleep, and Mat still would have switched places with him. Instead he sighed and got out of bed, washing his face and dressing quietly so as not to wake Perrin. He grabbed his coat and cloak and slid into the hallway.

Mat pulled the door behind him until he heard the quiet click of the latch, turned around, and somehow managed to swallow a shout. The hallway was littered with dead rats, maybe ten of them. Once the shock had worn off, he looked closer. His first glance proved right; they were all dead. He counted nine, each with its neck broken, lying in a pool of its own blood. *Rats. Necks.* His right arm began to tremble. *That can't be good.*

“Must be a cat did this,” Mat said to himself. *Please, please let it be a cat. Don't let it be...* He gave his head a shake. “Aye. An angry and decidedly untidy cat.”

Mat did not fancy being anywhere near this cat, or its prey. *Time to get out and see the city.* He half ran, half tiptoed to the end of the hallway, then flew down the stairs two steps at a time. As soon as he reached the bottom, his stomach growled at the smell of baking bread coming from the kitchen. *First get breakfast, then see the city.* He headed toward the kitchen but a calico cat walked right into his path and stopped. It turned its head and looked Mat dead in the eye for a seemingly endless few seconds, then darted away somewhere under the staircase. *First tell someone about the rats, then get breakfast, then see the city.* He wondered how the inn had so many rats in the first place. He put his hand in his coat pocket and felt his sling there, just like always. *A rat can't be no harder than a rabbit.* He walked briskly down the hallway and poked his head into the kitchen.

Inside he found a plump woman with flour-coated arms and a dirty apron. She was obviously the cook, and the ones running around with their heads down were serving maids and scullions and potboys and such.

The kitchen was filled with the smell of baking bread, and butter, and salt fish and eggs. Mat's stomach seemed to roar in longing. But first the rats.

"Good mo—" Mat began.

"Well," the cook interrupted, looking up, "you're a bit on the early side, lad."

"Bu—"

"Salt fish and egg won't be ready for a few minutes yet. You can wait in the common room. Go on, off with you now." One of the scullions nudged him toward the door. He was alone in the hallway again before he could get a word out.

He walked in to find the large common room nearly empty. Two men, hunched over a stones board, looked like they had been there since the night before. Another looked to be whispering secrets to his mug of ale between swallows. A few others were in various states of drunkenness; none tipped the scale toward sober. Mat didn't like the look of any of them. He was

considering going back to wait in the hallway when Master Fitch bustled in through a door at the opposite end of the room. As soon as he saw Mat, his face lit up and he doubled his speed.

“Young master!” he said. “Sit, sit! I’ll have someone bring breakfast to you. Sit!”

Mat grabbed the closest chair and sat at a small table as Master Fitch approached.

“Young sir,” the innkeeper said, “how does this morrow find you?”

“Well enough, Master Fitch,” said Mat. “Well, that is, except for the rats.”

“Rats?”

“The dead rats.”

“Dead rats?”

“Upstairs.”

“We have dead rats upstairs?” Master Fitch stomped into the kitchen.

“Benly!”

The kitchen door swung closed and the rest was a muffled series of instructions. A moment later a boy, no more than twelve or thirteen, came out of the kitchen with a canvas sack, a bucket, and a mop and headed straight for the stairs. Master Fitch followed on his heels, and both were upstairs in a flash. Master Fitch returned just a moment later and made a line for Mat when he got to the bottom of the stairs.

“So sorry, young master,” he said. “Benly will clean it right up.”

A heaving sound came from upstairs. *Benly will clean it right up.*

“It’s— I ain’t mean to complain, Master Fitch. I just thought you’d— ”

“No, lad. It’s good that you told me. Dead rats won’t do. And such a... *disturbing* display.” The innkeeper sniffed. “Something’s off with that cat. But no matter. Benly’s good at the cleaning. He’ll make it like they were never there. Filthy beasts. More and more of them in the city these days.”

Mat pictured the calico snapping all those rats’ necks in its jaws, biting down so hard they started bleeding out of their mouths. And then bringing them all to the hallway. *That cat must be queerer than Little Socks.* Mat would have thought that impossible, but the only other explanation he could think of was even more so.

Master Fitch was quickly on his way, getting The Stag and Lion ready for the guests who would be waking any moment. Mat was watching the men in the common room with a fascinated revulsion when a voice behind him almost made him jump out of his chair.

“Surprised to see you up so early, farm boy. You were watching your gleeman friend perform till late last night.”

Mat turned around and was happy to see Mari, the serving girl from supper last night, holding a tray with plates of bread, and cheese, and salt fish and eggs, and a pot of hot tea. She looked just as good at the beginning of her workday as she did at the end. She was short, maybe just a little taller than Egwene. Her dirty blonde hair, hanging in loose curls down to her chin, made her look girlish. The rest of her did not.

“Mari,” he said, flashing a grin. “Care to show a visitor all the splendors of Baerlon? I only have a day here and could use a friend who knows her way around.”

“Now, you see I’m working today,” she said. She never looked at him as she set down the plates of bread and cheese. “And if it were another day, I’d find another reason. A third day would find another reason yet. I’d never run out. You’d be amazed at my imagination.”

“I’m sure I would. Well, if you’re stuck working, you could just show me around the inn. There must be rooms I haven’t seen yet.”

“I m sure there are,” she said. She set down a large plate of salt fish and eggs, then finally looked Mat in the eye. Her lips twitched into a half smile for an instant. “I mean, I can’t imagine how you would have seen them, or who would ever show them to you. Downcountry boy like you.” She poured a mug of tea and set it down with the pot.

Mat smiled and leaned back in his chair. “Maybe you never been in those rooms, either. Ain’t allowed. If that’s it, I understand. Dark room. Unfamiliar. Could be scary, even for a city girl like you.”

Her eyes narrowed and her lips pursed, but she could play at being stern and unamused for only a few seconds before letting a low chuckle out.

“I m done working after supper, about an hour or two past sunset. Maybe I can show you some of the town then. If you’re around.”

Mat felt his stomach flutter and his breath quicken. “I might could be. If I don’t get lost in the city. Downcountry boy like me.”

She chuckled again and ran her fingers through his hair as she walked back toward the kitchen.

By the time he had finished eating, the entire inn was starting to wake up. A dozen men, maybe two, were in the common room now, having breakfast or tea or, in a few cases, ale. Mat decided to be on his way before any of his companions ventured downstairs. Nothing against them, he just wanted some time on his own in the city.

He left the inn through the kitchen, thanking the cook for a delicious meal as he walked by. She just laughed and shooed him on his way out the door. The stableyard was empty except for Mutch standing in the stable door with his arms crossed. Mat gave a little wave, but the hostler’s only answer was a cold stare that followed him from the inn door to the stableyard gates. Mat picked up his step, hoping the rest of the city was more friendly than old Mutch.

Mat stopped short when he got to the stableyard gates. Even at this early hour, people packed the street like sheep in a pen. Swathed to the eyes in cloaks and coats, their hats pulled down against the cold, they weaved in and out at a quick step. They looked like a mass of leaves blown along by an early winter wind, elbowing past one another with barely a word or a glance. 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 had said the whole city was full. *The whole city? Like this?* He stepped out into the sea of strangers and let the tide carry him where it would.

Mat had a beginner's trouble in trying to walk through the large crowd. He earned hard looks and hard words as he bumped and stumbled along, looking as much at the city around him as he was at where he was going. After crossing a few streets, Mat found himself on a broad boulevard where everyone had a bit more room. He took the chance to slow his pace and look around at his surroundings.

Baerlon seemed to him a grand city, whatever the gleeman said. Perhaps not the in the same way as cities in the songs and stories, but definitely grand. He stared at everything around him, delighted at the strangeness of it all. He wandered up wide streets, most paved with flagstone, and down narrow, twisting lanes. Not many of those were paved, and the night's rain had left them muddy. But he didn't care about mud or puddles. He was in Baerlon. He went wherever chance took him, taking in as much as he could as he walked.

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 counted nine inns, not one smaller than the Winespring and most as large as The Stag and Lion. He saw no palaces, though he supposed they would find those in Caemlyn.

Shops dotted every street. Awnings out front sheltered 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 treasures. More than one

shopkeeper chased him away after he had become entranced with a display. When, after the third time, he realized why they wanted him away, Mat just whistled. He had never been in a place with so many strangers that merchants had to be wary of theft and trouble.

The sea of people was never-ending. Some he imagined to be wealthy, maybe even noble, with long, fur-lined coats that flapped around their ankles. Some he guessed were the miners he had heard about, wearing rough wool and walking with hunched backs and staggered steps. But most looked no different than those he had grown up with, not in dress or in face. Indeed, some he could imagine coming from one family or another from around Emond's Field. One old fellow with an empty tankard had grey hair, ears like jug handles, and a pouty, toothless mouth. *He could be Bili Congar's close cousin.* A tailor sewing in front of his shop had an unmistakable lantern jaw and an unusual bald spot on the back of his head. *Jon Thane's brother, as I live and breathe.* He almost laughed when he bumped into a near mirror image of Samel Crawe while turning a corner, but then he saw a face that was more than just reminiscent of someone he knew. It *was* someone he knew. A man with bone-white hair that hung to his shoulders and a fat scar on his cheek.

"Master Fain!" Mat shouted. "We all thought you were—"

The peddler turned, freezing in mid-step when he saw Mat. People stumbled over him but he paid them no mind. "You!"

"Me," he said, unsure what the peddler meant. "It's Matrim Cauthon, from Emond's Field. Master Fain, it's so good to see you! We thought the trollocs had taken you for sure."

Master Fain's eyes shot open and he grabbed Mat by the cloak, pulling him into an alley.

"Hush, boy!" he said, his voice a hoarse whisper. "Don't mention such things. Whitecloaks walk the streets in Baerlon these days."

“Right, of course,” Mat said. “Whitecloaks. I wasn’t thinking. You— We all thought you were dead. Come back to the inn with me— The Stag and Lion. I’m staying there with friends. You know most of them. They’ll be glad to see you.”

“Dead?” the peddler said, laughing. “No, not Padan Fain. Not anytime soon. I know which way to jump and where to land, lad. Always have, and always will.” He smoothed down his grey cloak, which Mat now saw was a bit worse for wear. “Now, they burned my wagon, and all my goods. That’s a bad bit of luck, it is. I even had to leave my horses behind. If I had waited till the innkeeper saw fit to unlock the stable, they would’ve slit my throat, sure as sugar. All that I’ve got left is what I stand up in. But dead? No, not that.”

“Your horses are safe in the Mayor’s stable. Come with us. I’m sure Mistress A— that is, Mistress Moiraine, I’m sure she’ll help you get back to the Two Rivers.”

“That’s the Aes Sedai, eh?” Master Fain frowned, deep lines creasing his forehead. “I’d rather not be within miles of an Aes Sedai, but I can’t deny she’d be welcome protection on these wicked roads. Yes, you speak sense lad. How long will you be at this— What was it? What did you call it?— The Stag and Lion?”

“We leave tomorrow,” Mat said. “But what does that have to do with— ?”

“Alright, tomorrow. Don’t wait for me, don’t even mention me to the others. If I can untangle myself from the knot of Baerlon, I will join you. Otherwise, best no one has my name on their lips, not with... what we’ve been through. The wrong person overhears, and that’s the end of my story. Can I trust you not to mention me, even to friends?”

“Aye, you can at that,” Mat said. “Are you sure you can’t come now? The least you’ll get is a hot meal.”

“I wish it were that simple, lad. I have... duties in Baerlon. Goodbyes I must say and commitments I must make, and secure. The Stag and Lion. I hope

I'll see you there soon, Matrim Cauthon."

The peddler strode out of the alley and into the crowd. Before Mat could wish him well, Master Fain had disappeared. Mat put his hands in his pockets and waded back out into the sea of Baerlon. It seemed their party might grow by one. He smiled to himself and started whistling a walking tune.

It was late, so breakfast was just bread and cheese and milk. Even so, it suited Rand just fine. Having something in his stomach did wonders for his body and mind. The restless night had undone all the work of last night's hot bath, and added a dull, throbbing pain behind his left eye besides. It felt like the morning after sneaking too much of Father's apple brandy. *Way* too much.

It didn't help that the common room was bright and crowded. The midmorning sun poured in through the windows in the east wall. *How did I get no sleep and still sleep almost till noon?* Men crowded every corner of the room, most with pipes in their teeth and mugs in their fists. They sat on stools and chairs and benches, some at tables and some not. Some stood. Regardless of where he was in the room, every man there was leaning forward, his attention on one thing: Thom Merrilin, standing atop a table in the middle of the room.

Rand listened with half an ear as the gleeman plied his craft, focusing most of his attention on his food. As crowded as the room was, at least he had a small table to himself.

"...prancing, silver hooves and proud, arched necks," the gleeman said. When he said it, he somehow seemed 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 turn back the Dark..”

The gleeman was telling the tale in Plain Chant. Stories, he said, were told in three voices: High Chant, Plain Chant, and Common. High Chant you might hear in a nobleman’s court; it seemed a bit flowery to Rand. Plain Chant was still formal, but more for regular folk, such as might be gathered in an inn. Common, well that was just telling a story like you’d tell your neighbor over ale. Not much to it, to Rand’s way of thinking, and he gathered the gleeman thought even less of it.

“Rand.”

He coughed as some bread got stuck in his throat, then looked up. Moiraine Sedai— *Mistress Alys*— was standing right behind him. Somehow, she looked as fine and regal as ever, even after a short night in a strange inn. She pulled out the chair next to him and sat down without asking.

“Good morning, Mistress Alys,” he said. She gave him the hint of a smile and turned her eyes to the gleeman. Silence stretched between them as they listened to his tale.

When she finally spoke, it was with a quiet voice, and with her eyes still on the gleeman. “Good morning, Rand,” she said. “A late start?”

“Yes,” he said, “a bit.”

“Lucky for you. Your late sleep spared you from the rats.”

Rand paused in his chewing, then swallowed. “Rats?”

“Oh, yes.” She turned and faced him. Her dark eyes seemed to look through him, or *into* him. “Apparently the hallway was littered with dead rats this morning. They say the cat left them there, with their necks broken.”

Rand’s stomach clenched and the pain behind his eye flashed bright. *Broken necks*. He put his hand over his face as if he could hide from whatever was ailing him.

“Are you alright, Rand?”

Rand sat up straight and forced his eyes back open. “Yes, just a little headache. That’s all.” *I hope that’s all. If not...*

“Are you sure? Perhaps I could— ”

“No, it’s— it’s nothing. The cat, you say?” He rubbed his neck and thought of the rats.

Moiraine Sedai didn’t answer for a moment, looking at him as if holding him in judgment. “That is what they tell me. So you see, some good came out of your late start. But it does cut your lone day in Baerlon short, and I am sure you are eager to get started. Before you go, though, I did have something else I wanted to discuss with you.” She paused to drink some tea. Rand’s stomach turned inside out. He tried to think of what she might want to talk about. Every idea he had was worse than the last. Finally she broke the silence and stopped his mind spinning. “When we first met, back in Emond’s Field, you asked me to help your father, and made mention of a price. I believe you said, ‘I’ll pay any price in my power if you help him. Anything.’ Does that sound right?”

Rand’s mouth went bone dry.

“I thought on your words last night, after we had all turned in. I know that such a promise can hang heavy over a man’s head, especially when given to... one like myself. I would have you bear no such burden on my account. So let me say plainly, I will ask no price for what help I lent your father. It was my pleasure to be of service.” She bowed her head a fraction of an

inch, almost too little to notice. “Take this coin as a token of my good faith, a symbol of our new friendship.”

She produced in her palm a large silver coin, just like the ones she had given Mat and Perrin. *No price. Rand’s head was spinning. Free from my own desperate promise.* He took the coin and turned it over in his fingers. *Or do her words hide her true meaning, as Father warned me?* He shook his head. Being wary was well and good, but paranoia would serve him poorly. He put the coin in his pocket.

“Thank you, Mistress,” he said softly. “I think I’ll go out and see some of the city now.”

“Very good,” she said with a warm smile. “Be back for supper. You still have plenty of daylight to explore the city. Enjoy your time in Baerlon well, Rand al’ Thor. The morning will see us on the road.”

She turned her head back to the gleeman and seemed to lose herself in his tale at once.

Rand grabbed his cloak and walked out of the common room, through the kitchen, and into the stableyard. He was wrapping his cloak around himself when he stopped in midstride. Leaning in the door of the stable was a girl unlike any he had ever seen. She looked to be a little older than him, maybe nineteen or twenty, with dark hair cut shorter than his. She wore trousers, and a man’s shirt, and a man’s coat on top. In her hand was a cigar, which she puffed on as she looked him over. Rand thought he had seen her before, but couldn’t remember where.

“A shepherd with a heron-mark sword,” she said, her voice low and scratchy. She stood up and walked over to him. “That’s most enough to make me believe anything. What trouble you in, downcountry boy?”

“I’m not in trouble,” he said. He could still hear Lan in his head, warning them not to attract any notice. “What makes you think I’m in trouble? We don’t even *have* trouble where I’m from, less it has to do with crops, or sheep.”

She didn't answer right away. She just stood there, blowing smoke rings and tapping her foot.

"You're Rand, right?" she finally asked. "I'm Min. Now what I'm wondering is why a boy from downcountry, where there ain't no trouble less it's with crops or sheep, has a sword. A heron-mark sword. Seems likely it's trouble, and nothing but. Seems more likely when you see how you came into town, all sneaky like. You lot are running. I don't know from what, but you're on the run. Moiraine didn't tell me everything, but I see what I see."

Rand jumped at that last bit. He looked around quickly; the stableyard was empty, and the nearest windows were closed. He took a couple of steps toward Min so they could speak more quietly. "I don't know anybody named— What was it again?"

"Mistress Alys, then, if you prefer," the girl said with a crooked smile. She leaned in and whispered, "Ain't no one close enough to hear."

"What— What makes you think Mistress Alys has another name?"

"Because she told me. 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."

"Different?" Rand asked. He lowered his voice a little more and added, "What do you mean you 'saw' it?"

Min tilted her head and looked at him through narrowed eyes. "Well, I don't suppose you'll go running to the Children. Not with your traveling companions."

"What do the Children—"

"The Whitecloaks wouldn't like what I do any more than they like what she does."

Rand just looked at her. He still didn'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."

"Wh-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 said. "Egwene, too? But they weren't after— I mean—"

"The girl? She's part of it. And the gleeman. All of you." She paused. "You fancy her. I can tell that even without seeing any images. She fancies you, too. But she's not for you, nor you for her. Not the way you 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. He was starting to feel closed in even in the open air of the stableyard. His headache was fading, replaced by a nauseous dizziness. He wanted to get away from this girl and the things she saw. But if she had seen something about Egwene, maybe she had seen something about him, too. "Are there— That is, what do you see when you look at... um... at... the rest of us?"

"All sorts of things," Min said with a grin. "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, someone else— juggling fire, and a white tower. Around the big, curly-haired fellow I see a wolf, and a broken crown, and trees flowering all around him. I see an Aielman in a cage, and a falcon and a hawk, perching on his shoulders. 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 stopped and looked at him, that crooked grin still on her face.

Finally Rand cleared his throat and asked. "What about me?"

"You?" Her grin turned into a wide smile. "The same kind of things as the rest. A sword that isn't a sword, a crown of golden leaves, a beggar's staff, you pouring water on sand, black rock run red with blood— "

"Alright," he said, cutting her off. "You don't have to list it all."

"Most of all with you, I see lightning. Some striking you, some coming out of you. I don't know what any of it means. One thing I can say, though, is that you and I will meet again." She patted his cheek, her grin looking like it hid all the secrets to his life— past, present, and future. "I'd tell you the rest, country boy, but I don't think you could handle the excitement."

Her hand was hot on his cheek. He pulled away. "Do— Do you see anything about rats? Or dreams, maybe?"

"Um...rats? No, no rats." She paused, then arched an eyebrow. "As for dreams, maybe it's your idea of a dream, but it's never been mine."

Rand felt his cheeks and neck flush. "I— I have to go," he said, edging around her. "I-I-I have to meet the others."

"Go on, then. But you won't escape." Her grin finally turned into full-blown laughter. The sound of it sped him across the stableyard and out into the

street, into the hubbub of people. He didn't look back, and he didn't slow down until he was well away from the inn and completely lost.

He was on a wide street now, with many shops and no houses that he could see. He looked at the wares for sale as he walked by, and at the strange clothes some people wore. A man who could juggle near as well as Thom Merrill stood in the middle of one intersection, keeping five balls in the air at once. He saw a rich, horse-drawn carriage nicer than any he had ever seen. He also saw a man in rages, sitting in the gutter, asking for handouts from passersby. After a while he decided to try some of the smaller streets branching off from the one he was on. He found little of interest, just row after row of tall houses like the ones in Taren Ferry. Then, on the fourth or fifth small street he tried, he saw a house with three balconies, and on each one were a few naked women. It was a dizzying display. Some were as pale as snow, some were as brown as tea in a day-old pot. Some were tall, some were short. Some were bushy under their arms and between their legs, some had no hair at all from neck down. Some looked as old as Mistress al' Vere, some were surely younger than Egwene. All of them— every one— looked at him.

“Hey boy, you ever had your cock wet?”

“Wanna fuck me, papa? Fuck me hard? Pick a hole.”

“I'll suck it all out of you, baby, every drop.”

“I'll ride you like a jockey, boy. Just show me the silver.”

Rand backpedaled and almost tripped when he reached the street he had been walking down. Then just as he was regaining his balance someone bowled him right over. He looked up at the man who had knocked him down and was shocked to see a familiar face. *It couldn't be*. By the time he thought to call out, the man was out of sight. Rand was just about to stand up when he felt someone grab him by the back of the cloak and pull him up.

“Oy then, mate. Better be careful on these city streets.”

Rand turned around. “Mat? Uh, well met.” He wrinkled his nose, unsure if Mat’s “mate” was genuine or mocking. The horse trader’s son had never been friendly; Mat was one of the boys that had always looked down on him and Father, like they were outsiders instead of real Emond’s Fielders. But sure or not, Rand was getting desperate for a mate. Things with Egwene only seemed to get more strained and confusing with each passing hour. That left Perrin and Mat as his best shot— his only shot, really— and this chance meeting was an opening he dared not waste. “You won’t believe who just knocked me over, right here in Baerlon.”

“Let me guess,” Mat said. He started walking and Rand fell in alongside him. “Padan Fain.”

“Yes, but how— Did you see him, too?”

“Better than that. I talked to him a bit. Actually, I promised not to tell, but I don’t suppose it matters since you’ve already seen him.”

“Promise not to tell? Why?”

“Scared of the— of what we saw back home. He looked rather out of sorts, to be honest. Like he could use one of the baths we had last night.” Mat smiled.

“Right,” Rand said. He paused to catch his breath. “Well, I guess they didn’t get him then, did they? The things we saw.”

“I guess not. Hey, how long have you been out here? I was thinking of heading back to the inn.”

“Well, first of all, I haven’t a clue as to where that is. But I just got out here anyway, maybe a quarter of an hour ago.”

“What? Why so late?”

Rand’s head was pounding now, a stabbing touch on the left side. His first thought was to give an answer that would kill the conversation and dissuade

Mat from asking any more questions. Instead, he decided to tell the truth. Or at least part of it.

“I slept through to midmorning, if you can call it that. I don’t feel like I slept at all, really. The dreams— I had such bad dreams last night.”

Mat turned his head a little and narrowed his eyes. “Dreams?”

“Yeah, I was in Emond’s Field, only it wasn’t. Or rather, I didn’t *know* it was.”

Mat’s eyes opened wide. “And there was a man. In white. At the Winespring Inn.”

Now Rand’s eyes opened wide. “Did he— did he kill a rat?”

“Rats! Yes!” Mat shuddered. “When I woke up— I got up early, mostly to avoid the dreams— when I woke up, the hallway was... there were dead rats all over the hallway, with their necks broken. I wanted to believe it was a cat, but— Hey, he killed one rat in your dream? I mean, *it*. Væ’alza.”

“No, no. It killed three. Twisted their necks till...”

“Yeah, three in mine, too. I found nine in the hall. That leaves three... Do you think Perrin had the dream, too? That would add up.”

“If any of this adds up at all,” Rand said. His head felt like a balloon to the verge of popping. “Sounds like madness to me.”

“So do you believe in the Dark One now? You’ve seen trollocs and myrddraal, even Væ’alza in your dreams.”

Rand thought for a minute. “I believe someone, or something, is after us, something that commands halfmen and trollocs. We can call that thing the Dark One if that’s easier for you. But even if something like the Dark One does exist, I don’t believe what they told us about it growing up. I still say

those old stories just don't make any sense. The Creator and the Dark One? That *really* sounds like madness."

Mat sighed. "Have you told anyone?"

"No, I saw Moi— Mistress Alys. I saw her, and I was afraid she knew for a second, but I don't think so. I didn't say anything."

"Good. I think that's good." Mat took a deep breath. "Well, al' Thor. We're in it now."

"We have to talk to someone. Maybe the gleeman could give us some advice. He seems to know about all the stuff that Mistress Alys knows. You don't think we should tell Mistress Alys, do you? After what the man in the dream said?"

"No," Mat said slowly. "Too chancy. If we tell her, and he was lying, then maybe nothing happens. Maybe." He paused. "But if he wasn't lying... you remember the ferry, right? I say we keep quiet for now. Rats or no rats, better to keep dreaming than have our dreams snuffed out forever."

"Alright," Rand said. "Quiet for now. But I don't trust that man in the dreams. And Mistress Alys, she's saved my life, and my father's. So it's only for now, as far as I'm concerned."

"Hey, you don't think Perrin will say anything, do you?" They both stopped. "We have to get back." Mat turned around and started heading for an alley across the street, about two or three hundred spans back the way they had come.

Rand started to follow, then stopped and put his hands on his knees. The sudden change in direction had made him dizzy, and he was afraid he would fall if he took a step. After a few seconds, Mat came back and grabbed him. At the touch on his arm Rand blinked, then started walking. He did not fall.

"What's the matter with you, al' Thor?" Mat asked. "Taking a nap already? Out here?"

“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 he found it exhausting. Still, after a while he realized that he was the one talking. He was 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. “She just... *sees* things. I believe her. She was— I remember where I saw her before. She was the one Mistress Alys was talking to when we came to dinner last night. After the baths. And she knows who Moiraine Sedai is.”

Mat frowned. “I thought we weren’t supposed to use that name.”

“No,” Rand said. He closed his eyes and rubbed his head with both hands. It was so hard to concentrate on anything. His head felt so light he thought it might float away. “No, we’re not.”

“I think maybe you really are sick. Maybe you—” Mat 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 the men and women they saw 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.

“Children of the Light,” Mat said. “Must be.” A passerby looked hard at the two of them before hastening off.

Rand nodded. Whitecloaks. Some thought they were righteous. Father thought they were bullies. Men who told people how to live, causing trouble for those who refused to obey. If “trouble” were a strong enough word for burned farms and worse. *I should be afraid. Or curious. Something, at any rate.* He just stared at them without moving as they approached.

The Whitecloak at the front must have seen something he didn’t like. He started shouting at some old woman carrying baskets of clothes. Rand couldn’t hear what they were saying, but he was pretty sure that Father was right.

“They don’t look like so much to me,” Mat said. “Full of themselves, though, ain’t they?” Mat turned to Rand and grinned. *Why is he grinning?* “See that cart, al’ Thor?” 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 this.” Laughing, he darted into a cutler’s shop to their left.

Rand stared after Mat. He knew he should stop him— Mat was notorious for making mischief, and his mischief rarely ended well— but instead 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. He had never been party to Mat’s tricks before. He found that he liked it. So far, at least.

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, just in time to hear a sharp crack and see the stake holding the barrels shatter. The Whitecloaks were just coming abreast of the alley where the cart was parked. 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 Whitecloaks jumped no less quickly than anyone else, 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 he vanished back into the alley as soon as he saw the three Children trying vainly to shake the mud from their cloaks. Rand glanced up at the shop roof; Mat was gone. He had gotten away with it. Rand could not help laughing. The joke seemed to be surrounded by glass that made it look warped and watery, 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 didn’t blink, and his eyes seemed to silently claim that he knew something important, something no one else knew.

Rand stopped laughing. 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?” He looked at Rand’s hip, and the sword hilt sticking out from Rand’s cloak. The Whitecloak’s lip curled up a touch. “Perhaps you are responsible for this, yes?” He was the only one with 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 leader raised an eyebrow. “You are that dangerous, youngling?” Rand laughed again. This man was not much older than Rand. It was arrogance that made him talk so. Rand did not find arrogance impressive.

“Heron-mark, Lord Bornhald,” said one of the other Whitecloaks.

Bornhald glanced at Rand's sword hilt again— the bronze heron was plain — and his eyes widened. He looked at Rand's face and narrowed his eyes again. "He is too young," he said with a sniff. "You are not from this place, yes? You come from where?"

"I just arrived in Baerlon." A thrill ran like wind chimes along Rand's arms and legs. He felt flushed even in the cold air of early spring. "You wouldn't know of a good inn, would you?"

"You avoid my questions," Bornhald said. "What evil is in you that you do not answer me?" His companions moved up to either side of him, faces hard and expressionless. *Hmm. Not as funny.*

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 alive he felt. Smiling, he rocked on his heels and waited for what was going to happen, wondering what it would be.

The Whitecloak who hadn't yet spoken took a step forward, drawing his sword enough for an inch of steel to show. His voice quivered when he spoke. "When the Children of the Light ask questions, grey eyes, we expect answers, or—" Bornhald threw an arm against the man's chest, cutting off his speech. Bornhald directed the other two men's eyes up the street.

A dozen men stood ten paces off. They wore round steel caps and studded leather jerkins, and held quarterstaffs as if they knew how to use them. *Town Watch.* The newcomers said nothing as they watched.

"This town has lost the Light," said 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 burning eyes back to Rand. "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!"

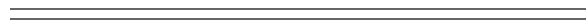
He spun and stormed away with his two companions close behind. For the moment, at least, it seemed they had forgotten Rand entirely. When they got back to the crowded street, the people once again made way, almost by accident it seemed, and then closed up behind them. They did not do the same for the Watchmen, who were trying to follow and falling farther and farther behind.

Rand still rocked on his heels, waiting. The tingle was so strong that he almost quivered, almost got sick, almost floated off the ground. He felt as if he were burning up.

“You aren’t sick, al’ Thor,” Mat said as he came out of the shop. “You’re *mad!*” His words sounded damning, but his smile and laugh spoke of joy and surprise and relief.

Rand drew a deep breath, and in an instant it was gone. The tingle, the removed anticipation, the flushed heat— all gone, like a bubble popped. He staggered a little as it vanished and he realized what he had just done. He met Mat’s stare and tried to answer, but his mouth was too dry to speak. He worked some saliva up and licked his lips. “I think,” he said, “we had best go back to the inn. Now.”

“Yes,” Mat said, still smiling. “Yes, I think we had better.”



The alley below was quiet. Had been since the morning. Every now and again someone would walk by, or a stray cat or dog, but mostly it was still. Perrin stood up for the first time in hours and tried to brush the chips and splinters and splinters off of his clothes. Wood trimmings practically blanketed the floor around his chair. He would need a broom, but that was for later. Right now he just wanted to move his body. The wood and knife had held him in thrall all day and his back and neck had grown stiff.

He stretched his arms high above him— he could almost touch the ceiling—and looked at the carving he had made. At the beginning, he hadn't set out to craft anything in particular. He had just let his hands do what they wanted. And today, after a week of work, it had finally revealed itself to him: a wolf. The head of a wolf, teeth bared and snarling. Once he knew what it was, it took only an hour or so more to finish. It was a pretty close likeness, Perrin thought. He set the carving down on the windowsill.

Why a wolf? Something about this carving felt important. Something about the wolf, but he didn't know what. He twisted left and right until he felt his back crack, then grabbed his cloak and headed downstairs. *Hopefully Mat and Rand are around. And some food would not go amiss.* He checked the common room first, but no one was there. At least, no one he knew. It was full enough with men and noise, but he saw no sign of his companions. He made his way back through the kitchen, giving hasty thanks to the cook and staff as he grabbed some bread and cheese, and stepped out into the stableyard.

Thom Merrillin was out back, puffing on his pipe and talking to Mutch, the stablehand. He smiled when he saw Perrin.

“Well, well. The boy walks among us again.”

“Good morning, Master Merrillin. Or is it afternoon?”

“It's well after— ”

“Heyo there!” Mat and Rand walked through the open gate to the stableyard, stopping the gleeman midsentence. “Just the people we were looking for.”

“Heyo Mat,” Perrin said. “Rand.” He didn't know what those two were doing together, but the fact of it made him smile.

“Lads,” said Master Merrillin.

Mutch slipped back into the stable as Mat and Rand entered, leaving just the four of them in the yard.

“Perrin,” said Mat. “This might sound a little odd, but, well, did you have any dreams last night? Bad dreams?”

Perrin narrowed his eyes. “Yes.”

“A man in white?” Rand asked. “A man in white who killed rats by— ”

“Yes!” said Perrin. “How did you— You had the same dream, ain’t you?”

“Dream?” the gleeman asked.

“Yes, a dream,” Rand said.

The three boys told each other and the gleeman about their dreams, all in a jumble, overlapping one another and gasping at the similarities and differences among the three dreams. All agreed, though, that all of their dreams were essentially the same.

When Mat mentioned Væ’ alza, the gleeman slapped his hand over Mat’s mouth and held a finger to his own lips. He peered around them, eyeing the entire stableyard, then pulled them all over to a corner away from any doors or gates. “Don’t ever say that name where strangers can hear.” His voice was soft but forceful. “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 barked a laugh. “I could tell you about Children of the Light,” he said, looking at Rand. Perrin opened his mouth to ask Mat what he meant, but the gleeman went on as if Mat hadn’t spoken a word.

“If only one of you had had this dream...” He looked down at the ground and shook his head, blowing through his mustaches. “Tell me again, slowly. Tell me everything you can remember this time. Every detail, however small.” He resumed his wary watch while the boys continued.

“...he named the men he said had been used,” Perrin 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,” the gleeman 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 asked.

“Men. Men who shook the pillars of heaven and rocked the world at 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?” Perrin asked. “Used and killed?”

“You might say the White Tower killed them. You might say that. But used...?” The gleeman shook his head again. “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, Master Merrillin?”

“Ach, boy. We’re in this together too deep for all that. It’s time you started calling me by my name. Honorifics are for children and strangers. You’re Mat. I’m Thom.”

“Thom,” Mat said, smacking his tongue as if tasting the gleeman’s name.

“But what *does* it all mean?” asked Perrin.

“Well, the Kinslayer and Hawkwing you know,” the gleeman said. “The Eye of the World, that’s an old legend. Mostly forgotten now. Those songs are lost.”

“What do we do, Master M— 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,” Perrin said, remembering what Moiraine Sedai had said to them outside of Baerlon.

The gleeman studied them, stroking his mustache with a knuckle. “I say hold your peace,” he finally said. “Tell no one, at least for now. You can always change your mind, but once you tell, it’s done, and you’re tied up worse than ever with... with her.”

“I don’t know, Thom,” Rand said with half a smile. “Mat’s none too good at keeping his mouth shut.”

Perrin chuckled. *It is well those two seem to be getting on. One way or another, we three look to be tied together in this.* Perrin would rather be bound up with friends than the other.

“Oy, hey now!” said Mat.

“It’s true, mate,” Perrin said, still smiling. “It ain’t your fault. Half the time, you don’t even know what you’re saying.”

“Well,” said a woman’s voice from the gate, “that explains quite a bit, really.”

They all looked over to see who had spoken. There on a horse, with her long braid hanging in front of shoulder, was Nynaeve. The Wisdom had found them in Baerlon.

Welcoming the Wisdom

The buildings were so large and close together that they hid most of the sky, even from horseback. The streets stank of unwashed men and used wine. And the noise, the constant flood of sound from merchants and wailing babies and feet on paved roads— Nynaeve could hardly hear the wind. *How will I ever find the children in this place?* She would have to trust to luck; it had gotten her this far.

The man at the gate had been worse than useless. He remembered and misremembered and completely forgot their arrival— them and the witch, and her man— five different times in their three-minute conversation. As she made her way into the city, she was almost surprised to see some of the inns he had named. *I suppose he isn't completely addled.* Still, none of those inns looked... *right*. She urged her mare forward. If her search proved fruitless, she could return to those inns later. For now, she pressed on.

Nynaeve turned left, right, and left again, and found herself at an inn whose sign showed a deer with massive antlers charging a giant maned cat, fangs bared in a roar she could almost hear. It didn't seem a terribly inviting sign, but she felt drawn to this place anyway. The inn was enormous, much larger than the Winespring Inn. She didn't see any hitching posts, so she made her way around to the back of the inn and found a stableyard. There, huddled together as if in some conspiracy, were all three boys and the gleeman that had come to the village for Bel Tine. Somehow she was not surprised.

Perrin was speaking to Mat. "... fault. Half the time, you don't even know what you're saying."

Nynaeve smiled to herself. *More than half, I'd say.* “Well,” she said, “that explains quite a bit, really.”

When the boys looked at her, their reactions nearly made up for the bother it had been to find them. Slack jaws and stammered excuses. Pleas for forgiveness giving way to the shallow defiance of boys who could still count the hairs on their chins. It was almost cute, and almost worth the trouble. But only almost, and soon it grew old.

“Enough,” she said. “I have come to take the lot of you home. Now. Gather your things. This farce is over.”

“Wisdom,” said Mat, “we can’t—”

“You don’t under—” Rand began.

“Young miss,” the gleeman said, “you must—”

Perrin just hung his head.

“I am afraid that will not be possible, Wisdom.” Everyone stopped at the sound of the Aes Sedai’s voice. She stood in the only doorway leading to the inn; Nynaeve could see a kitchen on the other side. The Aes Sedai’s dress was showy, far too nice for everyday wear. The sleeves, skirt, and trim were all a cream silk, with blue embroidery around the neck and cuffs, and in lines down the skirt from the waist to the hem. The bodice and underskirt were a rich, dark blue, with stitching to match. She wore a sheer scarf wrapped around her shoulders, and spoke with the same arrogance she had shown in Emond’s Field. “I am charged with their safety, and they are safest with me.”

“You presume beyond bounds, Aes Sedai. These ch—”

One moment, he was not there, and the next he had walked through the doorway, around the Aes Sedai, across the yard to Nynaeve’s horse, and was standing with his hand resting on the pommel of his sword. The Aes Sedai’s man was fast.

“You are confused, Wisdom,” he said in a low voice. “I think it best we move this conversation inside, away from all of these strangers.”

He smelled of horse and leather and metal, and his eyes were the cold blue of the winter sky. If he thought to scare her, his efforts would yield nothing but sharp and bitter failure.

“Why is that, sirrah?” she asked. “Have you secrets to hide?”

Before he could respond, the Aes Sedai broke in as if Nynaeve had not spoken at all. “Yes, come inside. Let us sit and speak over wine and bread.” She turned and walked back into the inn without waiting for an answer.

Nynaeve swallowed a growl and dismounted, then walked Clover to the stable. By the time she had handed the mare off to a stable boy, she and the warder were the only ones left in the yard. He offered to carry her saddlebag and blanketroll, but she just ignored him and walked straight into the inn. She almost collided with a stout, smiling man in the kitchen.

“Why, welcome, welcome. I am Master Fitch, and I welcome you to The Stag and Lion. You must be Mistress Alys’s companion. And well be with you, Master Andra.”

“Mistress—” Nynaeve started, confused.

“Never you mind about these,” the innkeeper said, taking her belongings. “I’ll put them up with the other women’s things. Cinda! Show them to their friends.”

A serving girl came and led them to a dining room where the boys waited at a table with the Aes Sedai and gleeman. Egwene was there, too, wearing a cloak though the blazing hearth fire had the room plenty warm. She even had her hood pulled up around her face. A closer look showed Nynaeve why—Egwene had undone her braid, leaving her hair as loose as a toddler’s. *If she thinks she’s too good to be a woman of Emond’s Field, I’ll enlighten her quickly enough.* She sat down at the foot of the table, opposite

the Aes Sedai. The warder came in behind her and stood at the mantel, leaning against the wall.

“Welcome to Baerlon, Wisdom,” the Aes Sedai said. “I hope the travel has not been too hard. These roads are not as friendly as they once were.”

“It’s been a fair sight harder than it would have been had you not stolen these children away in the night,” Nynaeve said. “I mean to bring them home, and you’ve naught to say to sway me.”

Three quick raps came on the door, then the innkeeper came in with a large silver pitcher of wine and cups for everyone. He looked from the Aes Sedai to Nynaeve and back again. “I— uh— I’ll just leave these here for anyone who wants some,” he said. He gave a deep bow and backed his way out of the room, closing the door behind him. The gleeman was quick to fill himself a cup, and for the next couple of minutes no one spoke as they poured wine for themselves or their neighbors.

“As I said before, Wisdom, that will not do. These boys are in grave danger, and I have ‘stolen’ them only to keep them safe and under my protection.”

“Well, we are agreed on the danger. What could be more dangerous than to be carried off by an Aes Sedai?”

“That is not known here,” the warder said. “She is simply Mistress Alys, and I Master Andra. Mistress Alys has made this room safe for the moment, but you’d best break that habit now. You *will* guard your tongue, Wisdom. You are not in Emond’s Field any longer.”

“I noticed,” she said. “That’s scant reason to 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.”

The gleeman broke in then, his voice low but powerful. “If you want them to see their village again— or you, either— you had best be more careful. There are those in Baerlon who would kill her”— he nodded toward the Aes Sedai— “for what she is. Him, too.” He stuck his arm out toward the warder

and tapped his finger on the table. His long mustaches and thick eyebrows seemed to hide many miles and many years.

“They’d swarm over this inn like murderous ants on a rumor, a *whisper*,” he continued. “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. They don’t care about finding the truth. They think they know that already, and they have only one sentence for that kind of guilt. No, their hot irons and pincers are for teaching, not for learning. Best you remember some secrets are too dangerous for saying aloud, even when you think you know who hears.”

Everyone was quiet for a moment. “Well said, gleeman,” the warder finally said. “I had not expected to find you so concerned.”

“It’s known I arrived with you, too,” he answered with a shrug. “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 is just one more reason for them to come home with me in the morning,” said Nynaeve. “Or this afternoon, for that matter. The sooner we’re away from you and on our way back to Emond’s Field, the better.”

The children all spoke up then, talking over each other in an incomprehensible jumble, then dying down into stilted silence.

“We can’t,” Rand finally said, looking first at the Aes Sedai and then Nynaeve. “If we go back to Emond’s Field, we bring the trollocs with us. They hunt us even now. I don’t know why, but they do. 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 your father, with this sackful of gleeman’s tales. He had himself carried to the village meeting and tried to convince everybody to let you go. He’d already tried with the men of the Council. He usually has a mite of sense, but your... *Mistress*

Alys... had made him believe. Well, the Council may be a pack of fools, but they weren't foolish enough for that, and neither was anyone else. Everyone 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."

"What about my da?" Mat cleared his throat. "What, uh, what did he say?"

"He's more afraid that you'll try your tricks with outlanders and get your head thumped than he is of 'Mistress Alys' here. Which, I must admit, is another real danger."

"Well, I expect—" Perrin started before taking a breath. "I mean, I suppose Master Luhhan weren't none too pleased about my leaving, either."

"Did you think he would be?" Nynaeve asked, shaking her head. She looked at Egwene. "Maybe I should not be surprised at this idiocy from three still well short of manhood, but I thought you had better judgment, Egwene al' Vere."

Egwene leaned back, trying to hide behind Perrin. "I left a note," she said, barely audible. "I explained everything."

"A note!" Nynaeve said. "How could you think—"

She was shocked when Rand al'Thor interrupted her. "Look. 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. But when he stopped, he sat a little straighter and looked her dead in the eye. "I may be in danger out here," he added, "but I'll not bring that danger back home on my father's head, not after it already almost killed him."

The other boys murmured their assent.

"Wisdom," the Aes Sedai said, "you must know that they are safer with me than they would be back in the Two Rivers."

“Safer?! You are the one who brought them here, where the Whitecloaks are. The same Whitecloaks who the gleeman says may want to kill them. Because of *you*. Tell me how they are safer, Aes Sedai.”

“There are many dangers from which I cannot protect them, any more than you can protect them from being struck by lightning if they go home. But it is not lightning they must fear, nor even Whitecloaks. It is the Dark One and its minions. From those things I *can* protect. I am Aes Sedai, Wisdom. My entire life is protecting the world from the Shadow. As is Lan’s. A life fighting the Dark One, and we still stand. Would you trade us as protectors for you and Master al’ Vere? Can you call lightning to destroy trollocs? Does the Mayor know whenever one comes within a quarter mile, as Lan does? Can you offer them half the protection we can if they return to Emond’s Field with you?”

“You stand up straw men,” Nynaeve said. “‘Whether the bear beats the wolf or the wolf beats the bear, the rabbit always loses.’ Take your contest somewhere else and leave Emond’s Field folk out of it.”

The Aes Sedai gave no answer, simply looking at Nynaeve with her hands crossed on the table in front of her. Nynaeve looked in vain at the woman’s facial expressions, searching for a clue to her thoughts or feelings. Mouth, eyes, nose, brow— all were perfectly still.

“Egwene,” the Aes Sedai finally said, “take the others and leave me and the Wisdom alone for a while.”

Egwene bounced to her feet and collected the boys with a raised brow and hurried off to the hallway with the gleeman close behind. Nynaeve could see the girl’s hair bouncing even under the hood of her cloak. *We will need to speak later.* The Aes Sedai nodded at her man and he raised himself off the wall. He looked at the Aes Sedai, then at Nynaeve. He too had his face trained to stillness, but where the Aes Sedai’s was the calm of a lake, his was the solemn hardness of stone. He gave each of the women a slight nod and then followed the others into the hallway, leaving them alone in the room. Nynaeve was not afraid. She was not afraid. She was not.

From their spot at the bottom of the stairwell, they were close enough to the dining room to see Lan standing guard outside but were far enough away that it was safe to speak freely. At least, Egwene hoped it was safe.

“How’d she even find us?”

Mat was twirling a silver coin in his fingers, lying flat on the floor with his head resting on the first step like a pillow. Egwene sat at a right angle from him, her back against the wall and her feet almost under his waist. Rand sat two steps above Mat. He leaned against the wall opposite Egwene, with one leg stretched across the step and one knee up. Egwene wished she could sit up there with him, maybe with her head in his lap and his fingers running through her hair. Like he used to do, his nails lightly scratching her scalp, tugging gently as he got tangled in her tresses. She missed it. *Why must he make everything so difficult, so complicated? Not everything is about his place in the village, or what Mama thinks, or whether I’m going to Tar Valon, or whatever else. Why can’t it sometimes just be about his skin, and my skin, and his mouth, and my mouth?* She hadn’t felt his touch, nor even spoken with him, since two nights before, in the woods, when Moiraine Sedai...

“Well,” said Perrin, sitting up above Rand but facing down toward all of them from the center of the stairway, “it don’t matter much how she found us. She found us.”

“What do we do?” asked Rand. “I meant it in there. We can’t go back.”

“And that,” Mat said. “That was— What’s come over you today? First the Whitecloaks, now you match faces with the Wisdom? You’ve gone brave or dumb, for true.”

“Whitecloaks?” Egwene asked. She didn’t know what Mat meant, but she had noticed how Rand had been with Nynaeve.

“I had a little— It doesn’t matter. You guys agree, right? We can’t go back.”

“Aye,” said Perrin, “that’s the truth of it, I’d say.”

“So then we don’t,” Mat said. “She can’t actually *make* us. I mean, Perrin could probably fit her in his pocket.”

Egwene rolled her eyes and gave him a light punch on his shoulder. He turned and looked at her with his mouth agape, rubbing the spot where she had hit him. She stared back, stone still and silent, but then his lip started quivering and she couldn’t hold back a laugh. She was still chuckling when another guest— an older man, stout, sandy hair, maybe in his forties or fifties— came down the stairs and had to tiptoe through them. She wished they could just be in one of their rooms, but whose? Nynaeve would tan Egwene’s hide if she caught her in one of the boys’ rooms, or them in hers. And Moiraine Sedai probably wouldn’t be too thrilled if Egwene let the boys into their room without asking her first. So here they were, in the stairwell, with strange, large men walking through them.

“It’ll come down to a contest of wills,” Perrin said, “the Wisdom and the... Mistress Alys. First time I reckon I’d lay silver against Nynaeve.”

“So what,” said Mat, “we just stay out of it then?”

“Better than stepping in the middle,” Rand said.

“But— ” Egwene started. She felt strange having this conversation with things still so awkward with Rand. But she refused to let the strain between them completely isolate her from the group. “Nynaeve won’t be easily turned about on this. I expect the more she learns about our journey so far, the more she’ll want to drag us back to the Two Rivers. I do *not* look forward to hearing her thoughts on me becoming... you know, like Mistress Alys.”

Rand’s face twisted with— what, malice? hurt? disgust? He looked away quickly, but Egwene had caught it. *Right*. She could have kicked herself. ‘*Safe to speak freely.*’ *Dumb, dumb, dumb.*

“Yeah,” Mat said, “nor about— ”

Mat stopped short when the door to the dining room opened and the Wisdom stepped out. They all stood up hurriedly. Mat and Perrin rushed off with just a mumbled goodbye. Rand was gone without a word. Nynaeve didn't seem to have noticed them yet; she was having a none-too-warm exchange with the warder. *I don't suppose she'll be making many friends in Baerlon.* Egwene sighed. She was eight years younger and just barely a woman grown, and had served as more of an assistant than a confidante, but she was still the closest thing Nynaeve had to a friend here. And after a long road punctuated by a head-to-head with Moiraine Sedai, she could probably use one. And, truth be told, Egwene could use one, too. She gathered herself and walked down the hall.

When she reached the door, Lan was just slipping back into the room to rejoin Moiraine Sedai. Nynaeve stood looking after him, her hands balled up in fists.

“Well met, Nynaeve,” Egwene said.

Nynaeve turned to face her. “Egwene. Have you come to try to talk me out of common sense, as well?” Egwene took a deep breath. *She snaps only because she is tired and lonely and far from home.* Patience would serve best here, and Egwene knew it.

“No, I have not. Though I daresay no one else has, either. No, I am here because it is a long road to Baerlon, certainly longer than any I have ever traveled, and you've just matched wills with Mistress Alys, and you seem to have argued with Master Andra, besides. I thought, after all that, you could use a friend.”

“A friend?” She unclenched her fists. “Aye, and who couldn't? But friendship is a luxury for a Wisdom. And it's the Wisdom you need, child, more than a friend. You have taken some silly notions in the past week. Look at your hair unbraided. Do you think yourself too good for Two Rivers custom? Why did you run off with this ragged lot? Is it for one of the boys? I swear, you girls would all end up children nursing children without

the Women's Circle to guide you. You should be leading those three, not the other way round, and you should be leading them right back home."

Egwene took a breath. *She didn't name Rand. She is spinning her own misgivings. She doesn't **know** anything.* "I'm not here for any of these boys, nor they for me. We each have our own reasons. But I know this much, and so should you— those boys can't go home. They have trouble on their tails. I disbelieved at first, as well. But those beasts, they attacked the boys' homes above all others, and then chased us all the way here. I wouldn't lead them home if I could."

"And you? Can you explain yourself to me? Why did you leave? Why do you fight to stay if these boys have truly drawn the Dark One's eye?"

"Me? I— I left because I could. Because I had the chance. I have looked and waited for one all my life. I'd not stay in a small village when it is surrounded by a big world. The world calls to me."

"You do! You think you're too good for the Two Rivers! Well, let me— "

"Not too good. *Not* too good. Just... not well suited."

"You, too, then. You and Rand, Mat and Perrin. All dug in." Nynaeve took a quick, deep breath and leaned her back against the wall as she let it out. "If *she* weren't mixed up in this... Aes Sedai are not to be trusted, Egwene."

Egwene considered revealing her own plans but thought better of it.

"Nynaeve," she said instead, "how did you find us? And why? I mean, why did they send the Wisdom? As well send my papa."

"Well, you had nowhere to go save Baerlon. Your trail was easy enough to follow to Taren Ferry, and I talked to that Master Hightower about your crossing. From where he left you, it was either take the road or trek through the heavy forests along the riverbank. You all seemed in a terrible rush, so I didn't think you would choose the bank. The road it was, then, and the road led to naught but Baerlon. And here I am."

“And the rest? Why you?”

Nynaeve glanced at the dining room door, which still hung a few inches from closed. “Let’s walk while we talk,” she said, taking Egwene’s hand in her own and starting down the hallway. When they far enough from the door to avoid being overheard, she began again. “The village meeting was — well, it was a shambles. Everyone agreed that we had to send someone after you, but there the agreement ended. The village split into two groups. The first wanted to rescue you— which is not to say they had a plan for how to do it, considering that you’re with a... you know, with the likes of her. Everyone had a different idea.”

“And the others believed Master al’ Thor?” Egwene asked.

“Not exactly.” Nynaeve stopped as they reached the stairwell. “They agreed with him that you didn’t need rescuing, that it was more important that you lot were ‘safe’ than that you were at home. But they also thought you shouldn’t be among strangers, especially someone like her. They meant to join you, not retrieve you.

“Well, either way almost every man wanted to be one of the party. Tam and Haral Luhhan, till Alsbet made him sit down. Paet al’ Caar, Alwyn al’ Van, Rowan Hurn. Even the Mayor wanted to go. I could see it would take them a day or more just to choose the party— a day I was somehow sure we couldn’t spare. Dead sure. So I called the Women’s Circle together and told them what had to be done. I can’t say they were pleased, but they saw the right of it. I set out straight away, and left word that I would take care of it. And that is why I am here— because the men were too busy squabbling over what to do to actually do it. They’re probably *still* arguing about who should go.”

“You know, you won’t get the boys to go home,” Egwene said. “They are just as stubborn as their fathers.”

“And you’re just as stubborn as yours,” Nynaeve snapped.

“And you could round up every man in the Two Rivers and not find a head as hard as the one on your shoulders.” Egwene took a breath. *Patience*. “I am sorry, Wisdom. It has been a long week, and my temper is shorter than it should be.” Nynaeve gave only a slight nod in answer, but Egwene thought she saw her shoulders relax. “What did you discuss with Mistress Alys? Did none of it sway you?”

“Bah, more of the same. The boys would be in danger back home, they can be safe with Mistress Alys and her *sisters*, on and on. She asked questions, too. A lot of questions. Mostly about the boys. What were they like as children? Were any of them born in the outlands? Is any of the boys unusually lucky? Or well liked? Or belligerent? Do strange things seem to happen a lot around any of them? All manner of odd questions she said would help her sort out why they may have attracted such attention.”

“Wow. What did you tell her?”

“I told her nothing, or as close to nothing as I could. It’s no business of hers, nor any outlander’s.”

“Well, there’s nothing to tell, anyway, right? They’re just three normal boys.”

A heartbeat’s pause. “Of course,” Nynaeve said, but she wore the look of a woman with a secret.

“Nynaeve!”

“What? It’s nothing. And if it weren’t, it would still be none of mine to tell.”

“You know something.”

“It isn’t your business. It might not mean anything. She could just be searching blindly for a reason, any reason, why those things are after him. After them.”

Egwene managed a grin. “Then you do believe they’re chasing the boys.”

Nynaeve shook her head. “That woman has been teaching you how to twist words.”

“What will you do?” Egwene asked.

“Today, I am going to have a bath. For the rest, we will have to see, won’t we?”

Watched and Hunted

“There she stands— strong as the ash, lithe as the willow branch, beautiful as the cherry blossom. Bellesse of Matuchin, with the strawberry hair. Ready to die before she yields. But lo, from the city towers blare trumpets brazen and bold, and in the halls her heralds’ cries echo, a hero come to court. Drums rumble and cymbals leave rents in the air as Rogosh Eagle-eye strides toward her, come to do homage...”

Mat had heard Thom tell this tale before— *The Bargain of Rogosh Eagle-Eye*, part of the Great Hunt for the Horn— but every telling was different, and he was as mesmerized as the rest of the room.

He sat on a bench with Perrin and al’ Thor, the three of them squeezed together so that two other men could sit beside them. Every bench in the common room was as crowded as theirs, and every chair filled. The room was packed with men, women, even some children, and not only those staying at the inn. Thom had told a few stories during the day and had spent the rest of his time spreading word of his performance tonight. Mat had never been in a room with as many people, and all eyes were on the gleeman standing on a table against the far wall. Friends ignored one another, food grew cold untouched, maids stood neglecting their duties, and the only sound competing with the gleeman’s voice and harp was the crackling of the fires in the fireplaces.

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*. He followed that in turn with *The Fall of Aleth-Loriel*, then *Gaidal Cain’s Sword*, then *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, one with a drum and the other with a hammered dulcimer, sitting beside the table while Thom remained atop it.

The gleeman played the first notes of *The Wind That Shakes the Willow*, and soon the whole room was clapping together. Some joined in the singing, and by the end, Mat was singing along with 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 someday soon, I hope to see
her laughing, with her hair blowing free
in the wind that shakes the willow.”*

Only One Bucket of Water followed, and people rushed to clear tables from the floor to make room for dancing. The two strangers sharing their bench got up to look for partners, and by the time Thom started the verse, the stomping was shaking the walls.

Mat stopped his clapping when a boy he didn't know squeezed between him and al' Thor.

“Ho, Rand.” The boy's voice was rough and he smelled of tabac. He held a mug of ale that threatened to slosh all over the lot of them but never did.

“Good even, Min,” al' Thor said. “What brings you here? Aren't you even going to give me a *chance* to escape?”

Min? This is the girl with the visions? Mat looked more closely, but her eyes gave no sign of special talent. He could see now, though, that below her boyishly short hair were the smooth, soft features of a girl. She was

really quite pretty. In a boyish sort of way. *I wonder if she's seen anything else about me.*

“Funny, downcountry boy. But I didn’t come here for laughs, or to gawk at the gleeman.” Min looked sideways at Mat, then at Perrin on the far side of al’ Thor. Perrin was clapping and singing; he hadn’t seemed to notice Min at all.

“Mat’s alright, there,” al’ Thor said. “You could almost say we’re friends. Anyway, I already told him about you. He’ll hold your secret.”

“Right, then,” she said, taking a pull of her ale. Mat leaned close to hear her, though he knew the words were for al’ Thor. “A new woman came to the inn sometime today. I saw her not long ago in the hall— 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. Whatever it is you’re in, you’re in it with her.”

Mat looked at al’ Thor. “That’s...” he started.

“That’s not possible,” said al’ Thor.

“You know her?” Min asked.

“Aye,” Mat said, “and she can’t be mixed up in— ”

“In whatever it is you think— ” al’ Thor said, interrupting him. Mat wouldn’t have said anything about their situation, but how could al’ Thor know that? Until they were better friends, best he and al’ Thor cut each other off than risk one saying too much. *Funny, thinking that al’ Thor could be a friend.* Mat remembered what Perrin had said on Winternight and smiled.

“The sparks, Rand,” Min said, talking right over al’ Thor before he could spin out whatever fib or half-truth he had in mind. “When I saw her, she was fresh out the bath and come downstairs to find some supper. Mistress Alys was coming back from a walk, and Rand— the 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."

Mat shared another look with al' Thor.

"I guess we ain't going back home," Mat said.

"I could have told you that," said al' Thor.

"The sparks— It's almost a wonder the inn doesn't catch fire," Min said.

"You're all in more danger today than yesterday. Since she came."

"Well, she's no danger," al' Thor said. "She wouldn't do a thing to hurt us."

"Unless you count a slap to the cheek," Mat said, "or dragging you about by your ear."

"Well yes, there's that."

"Or giving you nasty herb teas to cure what ails you, though we all know she'll do it out of spite, too."

"Yes, she will at that."

"Or— "

"Enough, you silly boys," Min said, standing up as the song ended. "I've told you all I know. I figured as you'd want to hear. I've told Mistress Alys, too. Now, I go to dance." She smiled like... well, like Mat when he had a trick in mind.

Perrin finally noticed her when she stood up, and he looked over at Mat and al' Thor. Mat shrugged, which seemed enough of an answer for Perrin, who stood up himself and made for the dance floor. Mat stood and stepped up to the dance floor. He paused and turned back to motion al' Thor to join them. Al' Thor pointed to the axe Perrin had left behind, and the cloaks all three of them had placed on the bench. Mat smiled and ran off before al' Thor could try to switch with him.

Maybe the man wasn't cross; maybe he just couldn't smile, what with that scar. Rand had never seen one so nasty. It ran across his entire face, from his right temple to his left jaw, twisting his features to its own design. His nose it gave a vicious slant, and it drew down the corners of his mouth. This perpetual frown was only made more severe by the way he chewed on his pipe stem. When he caught Rand looking at him, the man seemed to snarl, his forehead knotting in lines just as deep as those around his mouth. *Great, forget your manners with the one man here who looks like he might hurt you for it.* Rand looked away as quickly as he could.

The scar-faced man wore the only frown in the room. Everyone else was laughing, especially the dancers. They leapt and kicked and rotated partners; they stomped and sang and took drinks during pauses. Rand enjoyed watching, but was happy to sit to the side, drinking his ale. Nothing good would happen out on the floor. At best, he would dance with Egwene and end up frustrated and confused. At worst, he would *not* dance with her and feel bitter and blue. But after three songs, Mat came back and threw himself down on the bench, sweaty and smiling.

“Go on, get in there then,” he said. “The girls will be here tomorrow, but you won't.”

Rand sighed and didn't move until Mat pushed him off the bench. He had to hurry to line up before the next song started. *At least things seem to be going better with Mat.*

The dancers formed two long lines facing each other, men in one and women in the other. Thom played a lilting melody on his flute. When the drum and the dulcimer took up the beat, 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. On the next beat, 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.

His next partner was one of the serving maids. Her apron flapped wildly about as she spun. He caught her and then whirled her in a circle before they switched again. As they changed partners, Rand caught Perrin's eye. The blacksmith was paired with a short, curvy barmaid with a tattoo on her cheek. He gave Rand an innocent shrug and a smile. Rand threw his head back and laughed. *Alright. This is better than sitting on the bench.* 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. He smiled wide.

Over by the fireplaces, the scar-faced man was still in the same seat, scowling at Rand as he danced. Rand had meant no offense, and didn't really think he had been staring. *If he's set on being cross, nothing I do will change that.* Rand sighed and turned to meet his next partner. When Nynaeve spun into his arms, he forgot all about the man with the scar on his face.

Normally, Rand was a decent dancer. He was no Wil al' Seen, sure, but he was better than most. Now, though, dancing with the Wisdom, his feet completely lost track of themselves. He stumbled through the steps, almost tripping over her feet more than once. It was his good fortune that Nynaeve was graceful enough to make up for his clumsiness. *How is she this good? I've never seen her dance once back home.* By the end of the verse, he had recovered well enough to spin Nynaeve into the arms of her next partner. As she twirled away, he heard her laugh and say, "I thought you were a better dancer, Rand al'Thor."

Any relief he felt at seeing the Wisdom dance away was short lived, for when he turned his head he found Moiraine Sedai in his arms. With Nynaeve, he had felt stumble-footed; with the Aes Sedai, he felt downright dangerous. Twice he almost fell over right on top of her. Another time he stepped too far toward a row of chairs and nearly ended up in the lap of an

older woman, who just used her cane to push him back where he was supposed to be. Moiraine Sedai, on the other hand, was the best dancer he had ever seen. She glided across the floor smoothly, her gown swirling about her. Her steps seemed both more intricate and more effortless than anyone else on the floor. The sympathetic smile she gave Rand when she saw him struggle only made him feel worse. He was almost happy when Egwene took the Aes Sedai's place at the next switch. Almost.

Egwene's face was flushed and beaming, and her eyes twinkled in the firelight. But when she found herself facing Rand, her smile faltered. Rand's heart sank a bit; she had always loved dancing, and he hated to turn it into a chore for her. He had little choice, though, as it would be even more distasteful to try to switch out or sit down in the middle of the song. So on they danced.

Egwene had always been a better dancer than he, but they'd made a good pair at many a festival. This night, though, they started out stiff and awkward together. Rand didn't know where to put his hands, or how much space to leave between himself and Egwene. He ended up dragging his feet and had to fight to regain the rhythm. When he found it, he stopped thinking and tried to just feel it. After a few turns, dancing with Egwene felt like dancing with Egwene. Only more so.

Every step and turn with her was a bit more suggestive than with the other women. Her hand squeezing his hip instead of brushing against it. His hand resting at the side of her breast instead of the top of her waist. The way she pressed her back into him after he twirled her around. *This is all just a big tease. If I couldn't see it before, it's clear as the Winespring now. I'm just a distraction to her; her real life lies elsewhere.* Rand felt excited and defeated at the same time. He hated it, and was relieved when it came time to switch again. Relieved and slightly panicked.

As he passed Egwene off to the next man, he almost stopped dead in his tracks. The next man was Min, with her boy's coat and trousers and close-cropped hair. Only a near collision with the tall, skinny girl waiting to dance with him shook Rand loose from his surprise.

After a few turns with the tall girl, the reel was done. Rand was exhausted and confused and all too happy to return to the bench. Thom and the other musicians started playing a jig as he sat down. Mat hurried to rejoin the dancing, and Perrin slid onto the bench next to Rand.

“Did you see her?” Perrin began before he was even seated. “Did you?”

Rand stared at him blankly for a moment, trying to think why Perrin would take such an interest in Egwene. *He doesn't mean Egwene, you dolt. Nor Min neither.*

“Which one?” Rand asked. “The Wisdom, or Mistress Alys? I danced with both of them.”

“Mistress Alys, too? I danced with Nynaeve. I ain't even know she danced.”

“I know, I thought the same thing. And she's good. I nearly fell all over myself dancing with those two.”

Perrin started to say something, but the music and the clapping and the singing grew too loud for any further talk. Rand had lost interest anyway. He just wanted to go to sleep. Instead he clapped along with the crowd as the dancers circled the floor. He watched Egwene as she kicked and slid and spun and laughed and smiled. She was beautiful. *How could we not be for each other? What was Min on about?* He shook his head and did his best not to think about any of it.

Every now and then Rand's eye would wander back toward the fireplace, and time and again he found the man with the scar staring at him. Rand knew he was in the wrong for having looked so closely at the man before. Anyone would be a bit touchy with a scar like that. But as bad as he felt, Rand could think of nothing to do now that would not make matters worse instead of better. He tried to concentrate on the music and ignore the fellow altogether. But every time the dancers drew his eye toward the fireplace, Rand saw him—sitting in his chair, smoking on his pipe, and staring bloody murder right into Rand's skull.

This would be the last dance. Most people had turned in— Rand included— and most of those who hadn't were sitting at tables, nursing drinks. Without enough dancers to form proper lines, those who were still going switched partners only between songs. Egwene had spent all of the last song paired with Mat, and all of this one with the strange girl who had been dancing the boy's part all night, wearing a boy's haircut and clothes.

When the song ended, the girl pulled Egwene close and kissed her on the mouth, firm and wet, then patted her cheek. Egwene's eyes went wide. The girl's mouth smelled of ale, and her hands smelled of smoke. Egwene could feel her own heartbeat behind her ears. "I see why the boy likes you so much," the girl said, then laughed and skipped out the back door, into the night.

Stunned, Egwene walked over to where Mat sat nursing an ale of his own.

"I see you've met Min," he said as she sat next to him. "Curious lass, that one."

"You know her?"

"Not really. Rand met her today. She's..." Mat made the squinty face that meant he was thinking. "Well, she's an odd one, is all."

Egwene nodded slowly. *What's she to do with Rand?* She was going to ask more about this Min, but Lan came round to gather them up.

"We have to make an early start," the warder said, "and we will need all the rest we can get. Come on now. The others are already in bed."

Mat looked over at a man sitting by the fireplace. An angry scar divided his face, and he seemed to scowl at them.

“Lan,” Mat said, “that man over there, the one with the scar. He’s been staring at me all night. You don’t suppose he could be a... well, one of the *friends* you warned us about?”

“I saw him,” Lan said, never looking over at the fireplace. “The other boys mentioned him before retiring, as well. According to Master Fitch, he’s a spy for the Whitecloaks. He’s no worry to us.”

Whitecloaks? “Mat, didn’t you say Rand—” Egwene began.

“How early are we leaving?” Mat asked, cutting her off.

“At first light,” said Lan. “So let’s go, now.”

Egwene and Mat grabbed their cloaks, and the gleeman joined them as they made their way to the stairs. Mat was singing something under his breath, stopping now and again to try out a new step he had learned. Thom was aglow, talking to Lan about the differences in songs between Andor and the Borderlands, while Lan listened with the stony, inscrutable expression that seemed to be carved permanently on his face.

Her room was the last place Egwene wanted to go. It wasn’t her love of dancing alone that had kept her downstairs. The Stag and Lion was full past capacity, so Master Fitch had no choice but to put Nynaeve in Egwene and Moiraine Sedai’s room. A night alone with the Wisdom and the Aes Sedai was not a pleasant thought.

“You lot go ahead,” Egwene said. “I’m going to get some milk.”

Lan looked at her, pausing just a second before speaking. “Something is 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, sounding decidedly less cheerful than before. Egwene was surprised at how lonely the empty hallway felt after spending all night in the common room with so many

people. She hurried to the kitchen, where a scullery maid poured her a mug of milk from a big stone crock.

As she walked out of the kitchen, holding her mug in both hands, a dark figure started toward her down the length of the hall. It was scarcely taller than Egwene, wrapped in a dull black cloak that hung motionless even as it walked steadily in her direction. Pale hands rose and tossed back the cowl, revealing the face beneath. It was a man's face, but pasty white like a slug under a rock, and without eyes. Instead, two slight depressions framed the nose on either side, almost as if someone had closed the eyes forever behind a smear of plaster. He— it?— had no eyebrows, but its oily black hair was pulled back from its forehead, not unlike Egwene's.

Fade.

Egwene stood nailed to the floor, though she tried with all her might to run.

"You are with them," the fade said, its voice a file drawn across broken bone. "The three boys."

She dropped her mug, and it shattered on the floor. Her feet were covered in milk. She lifted her left foot and took a slow step backward. She took a few halting steps, trying to run but failing. She could not break free of that eyeless gaze. She tried to shout for help, to scream, but her throat was like stone. Every ragged breath hurt.

The fade glided closer, in no hurry, moving with the sure and deadly grace of a viper. Thin, bloodless lips curved in a cruel smile, made all the more mocking by the smooth, pale skin where eyes should have been. "Where are they? I know they are near. Speak, and I will let you live."

Egwene's back struck wood— a wall or a door, she could not turn around to see which. Now that her feet had stopped, she could not make them start again. She started shivering, and her shaking grew harder with every slow stride the fade took.

"Speak, I say, or— "

From above came the sound of a door slamming, followed by the quick clatter of boots in the hall. The fade cut off and whirled around, its cloak still seeming to hang motionless. It drew a sword as black as its cloak. The light in the hall seemed to grow dimmer in the presence of that blade. Lan appeared in the stairwell, vaulting his legs over the bannister, then sliding down while drawing his sword. He landed smoothly in a ready stance and stepped toward the fade. The black blade rose, and Egwene heard the thing growl.

“He belongs to the Great Lord of the Dark, *Dai Shan*,” the fade said, its voice a wound in the air, “just like Malkier.”

Lan leapt forward but the fade seemed to bleed into the shadows and was gone.

Egwene struggled to find her voice. “Fade,” she gasped. “It was...”

Lan nodded. “Yes. It’s gone for now. We haven’t the time to pursue it. We’re leaving. Now, before it comes back with its friends.”

Thom Merrilin poked his head down the stairwell. “Is that it then?” he asked. “Time to go?”

“It is for us,” Lan said. “If you stay or ride, that is your concern.”

The gleeman disappeared and more boots stumbled around upstairs. Soon he was bounding down the stairwell with the boys in tow, carrying their blankets and saddlebags. Mat was still buckling his bedroll, his quarterstaff held awkwardly under his arm.

A stableman came darting past them from the rear door, and then Moiraine Sedai appeared with Master Fitch, who was carrying both her things and Egwene’s. Behind them came Nynaeve, her face as cold and stony as the warder’s.

“You must take this seriously,” Moiraine Sedai was telling the innkeeper as he passed the bundles to a stableman. “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, the lads and I will give them short shrift. Aye, short shrift, be sure. 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 to leave in good order.” He pulled loose from her grip on his sleeve and made off in the direction of the stables.

Moiraine Sedai sighed. “Stubborn, stubborn man. He will not listen.”

“You think trollocs might come here hunting for us?” Mat asked.

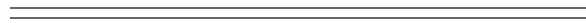
“Trollocs? Of course not.” The hard edge on Moiraine Sedai’s voice made Egwene nervous. It was not often the older woman seemed anything less than totally at ease. “There are other things to fear, not the least of which is how we were found. Now that we have been, the fade cannot believe we will remain here. But it will still send its darkfriend servants to learn what they can, and Master Fitch takes darkfriends too lightly. He thinks of them as wretches hiding in the shadows, but you can find them in the shops and streets of every city, and in the highest councils, too. Come, I have given all the warning I can. Let us away.”

As they started for the stableyard, Egwene fell in beside Nynaeve, who carried her saddlebags and blankets under her arms. “You’re coming with?” she asked.

“Was there something down here?” the Wisdom asked quietly. “She said it was—” She stopped and looked at Egwene.

“Aye, a fade,” Egwene said. It sounded so strangely harmless coming out of her mouth. “It was in the hall with me, and then Lan came.”

Nynaeve shrugged into her cloak against the wind as they stepped into the stableyard. “I came to see you safely back in Emond’s Field, all of four of you, and I’ll not leave till that is done. I certainly won’t leave you alone with *her* sort.” She made off toward the stables, and Egwene stood alone on the doorstep. She could feel the warmth of the kitchen on her back, but in front of her was just cold and dark.



“Looks like Min was right.”

Rand turned at the sound of Mat’s voice. Even at a whisper, it seemed loud in the abandoned streets of Baerlon.

“Right?” Rand asked, lowering his voice as much as he could. “About what?”

“The Wisdom.” Mat nodded his head toward Nynaeve, riding right on Egwene’s flank. “She’s part of it now. Part of this.”

In the rush to leave, Rand hadn’t considered Min’s words. *She’s part of it, right along with the rest of you. Whatever it is you’re in, you’re in it with her.* It hadn’t seemed possible at the time, but here they were, and here she was, all of them on the run together.

“I suppose so,” he said. Nynaeve joining their party was not all Min had seen. She had also seen danger. *Sharper and more furious.* A dog barked

from an alleyway on their right, breaking the uneasy quiet. When it stopped, he let the silence stand— and for a wonder, so did Mat.

Lan kept their pace brisk. Moiraine Sedai and Egwene flanked the warder on either side, and Nynaeve kept close to Egwene's side. Rand and the rest brought up the rear in a tight cluster. As they made their way across the sleeping city, Rand could feel the group getting more tense. An occasional noise in the distance, like a barrel toppling, or another dog barking, jerked every head around. By the time they reached the Caemlyn Gate, they had all bunched their horses closer to Lan's black stallion and Moiraine Sedai's white mare.

Everyone pulled to a stop as Lan jumped off his horse and started hammering with his fist on the door of a small square stone building squatting against the wall. A weary Watchman appeared, rubbing at his eyes and nose with balled-up fists or the back of his wrist.

"What's this then?" he asked, getting free of his sleepiness with a hard shake of his head. "You want to leave? Now, in the night? You must be mad!"

"Does some order from the governor prohibit our leaving?" Moiraine Sedai asked quietly. 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 Sedai said as if that settled the matter. "You see? We are not asking you to disobey the governor."

Lan stepped forward. "For your trouble," he said, taking the Watchman's hand and pressing it between his own.

“I suppose,” the Watchman said slowly. He glanced at his hand. Rand saw a glint of gold in the Watchman’s open palm before he stuffed his hand deep 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 squint and stare at the party of eight waiting to leave. *It’s a wonder they can watch anything with so much sleep in their eyes.* With the first Watchman urging them on, 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 were silent as they swung out into the night. Before they were even a quarter open, though, a cold voice from the dark of the city broke the rhythm of the crank.

“What is this? Are these gates not ordered closed until sunrise?”

Five men walked out of the shadows, faces hidden behind the drawn-up cowls of their bone-white cloaks. Each rested his hand on his sword, and the golden suns on their left breasts made it plain who they were. Mat muttered something to himself. Rand felt panic creeping in at the corners of his mind. He took a deep breath and tried to do as Father had taught him— *the flame and the void, the flame and the void*— but the emptiness kept slipping away like quicksilver at his fingertips.

“This is none of your affair,” the first Watchman said, stepping forward and putting his hand on the hilt of his own sword. All five white hoods turned in his direction. He finished in a weaker tone, but left his hand where it lay.

“The Children hold no sway here. The governor— ”

“The Children hold sway wherever men walk in the Light.” The Whitecloak in the middle seemed to be the leader. Rand thought he recognized his voice, though he hoped dearly that he was wrong. “Only where the Shadow reigns are the Children denied, yes?” He surveyed the group, his eyes resting on Lan.

Lan had not moved, nor done anything suspicious that Rand could see. In fact, Lan seemed completely at ease. The Whitecloak, though, seemed less and less at ease the longer he stared at Lan. When he spoke again, he spoke slowly and tried to watch everywhere at once without taking his eyes off of Lan.

“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?”

Rand hunched lower in his saddle. *A draghkar. I shouldn’t be surprised.* This night was getting worse by the minute, and would surely come to a head if the Whitecloak noticed Rand.

The leader of the Whitecloaks eyed the braided leather band that crossed Lan’s forehead and held his long hair back. “A northerner, yes?”

“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 and gave a quiet sigh. “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. But the Children of the Light see.” The Whitecloak’s eyes turned to the people on horseback. “The Children of the Light smell the evil. Smell it and root it out, wherever we find it.”

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, flashing a wolfish grin. “Clearly, Watchman, I have saved you from a great disaster. These are darkfriends, and you nearly helped them escape from the Light. You should be reported to your Governor Adan for discipline, or perhaps given to the Questioners to discover your true intent this night.” He paused, eyeing the Watchman’s fear. “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 Sedai’s voice came from every direction at once. She had moved back into the night at the Children’s approach, and was almost lost to the eye now. “You will question me?” She took a step forward. The darkness wreathed her, made her seem taller. “You will bar my way?”

Another step. Rand gasped. She *was* taller, her head level with his where he sat on the stallion’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 Bornhald drew and slashed all in one motion.

Rand cried out as Bornhald’s sword came down, but it turned away without touching her, as if a wall stood between her and the Whitecloak. The steel of his sword began to glow, ever more brightly, until heat waves made it seem to quiver in the air. The Whitecloak gave a shout as he dropped it to the ground.

“You dare attack me?” The Aes Sedai’s voice roared like a winter windstorm. Shadows 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 Sedai’s mare and leapt into his own saddle. “Now!” His shoulders

brushed either gate as his stallion tore through the narrow opening like a flung stone.

For a moment Rand remained frozen, staring. The Aes Sedai'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. Her face was lost in the night, but her eyes shone as big as full moons. They rested on Rand for a fraction of a second, and they did not look pleased. Swallowing hard, he booted his mount in the ribs and galloped after the others.

Fifty paces from the wall, Lan drew them up, and Rand looked back. Where he expected to see Moiraine Sedai's head above the wall there was nothing, just clouds and stars. He heard a chorus of shouts from inside, probably from Watchmen and Children both, and then the gates began swinging shut more quickly than he would have guessed possible.

"Hold the gates!" an unsteady voice cried out from the other side of the wall. "We must pursue them. We must take them in hand." But the gates did not slow, and from the shadow of the wall emerged a small, cloaked figure, walking toward them with a graceful quickness. The gates slammed shut, and moments later the bar crashed into place.

Moiraine Sedai hurried to her mare, stroking its nose once before swinging into her saddle.

"You were taller than a giant," Egwene said, shifting on Bela's back. No one else spoke, though Mat and Perrin edged their horses away from the Aes Sedai.

"Was I?" Moiraine asked.

"I saw you," Egwene said.

"The mind plays tricks in the night; the eye sees what is not there."

When Nynaeve spoke, her voice held none of the wonder that Egwene's did. "This is no time for games, Aes—" she began before Moiraine Sedai 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. 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 help from the Aes Sedai.

Less than an hour into their ride, Mat cried out and pointed back the way they had come.

"Look!"

They all drew rein and stared.

Flames lit the night over Baerlon as if someone had built a bonfire as big as a house. The blaze stained the clouds red, and sparks whipped into the sky on the wind.

"I warned him, but he would not take it seriously." The Aes Sedai stared out at Baerlon, and Rand was not sure she wasn't speaking to herself. Her mare tossed her head and pawed at the loose earth beneath them. "He would not take it seriously."

"The inn?" Perrin asked. "That's The Stag and Lion? But how can you know?"

"How far do you want to stretch coincidence, lad?" 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 fortune has not abandoned us altogether,” Lan said.

Egwene rounded on him. “How can you say that?” Rand could see the firelight dancing in the tears she held back, even at this distance. Her lip rose in half a snarl. “Poor Master Fitch’s inn is burning. People may be hurt, or dying. And you think this good fortune?”

“If they have attacked the inn,” Moiraine Sedai said, “perhaps our exit from the town and my... display went unnoticed.”

“Unless that’s what the halfman wants us to think,” Lan said.

“Perhaps,” the Aes Sedai said, nodding. “In any case, we must press on. There will be little rest for anyone tonight.”

“You say that so easily, Moiraine,” Nynaeve said. “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 good and evil, right and wrong, here you are ready to go on without sparing a thought for him. You have brought this trouble on that man’s head.”

“Because of those three,” Lan said, pointing at Rand, Mat, and Perrin. “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 it wants this badly, it must be kept from. Or would you rather let the halfman have them?”

“Be easy, Lan,” Moiraine Sedai said. “Be easy. Wisdom, you think I can help Master Fitch and the people at the inn. Well, you are right.” Nynaeve started to say something, but the Aes Sedai 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 in 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 halfman 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 whoever set that fire, not to mention the Whitecloaks. Which alternative would you choose, Wisdom, were you I?"

"I would do *something*," Nynaeve said, her teeth clenched.

"And in all probability hand the Dark One its victory," Moiraine Sedai said. "Remember what— whom— it wants. We are in a war as surely as anyone in Ghealdan, though thousands fight there and only we eight 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. *Danger, sharper and more furious. I hope Min is alright.*

All was still pitch dark when Lan finally led them off the packed dirt of the road and dismounted. Rand looked at the eastern horizon. Dawn couldn't be more than a couple of hours away. They hobbled the horses, still saddled, and made a cold camp.

"One hour," Lan said. Everyone was wrapping up in their blankets. Everyone save the warder; 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 thought we were safe, you know. Not a sign of anything since we crossed the Taren. And there we were in a city, with walls all around us. I thought we were safe. And then that dream. And the fade. Will we ever be safe again?"

"We'll be safe in Tar Valon." Rand tried to say it strongly, but he could hear the question in his voice.

"Will we?" Perrin asked softly.

Rand looked over at the Aes Sedai, but all he could make out was a shadowy mound. He didn't bother looking for Lan; he knew he would not find him.

"We'd better get some sleep," Perrin said. "Staying awake won't answer anything."

"She should have done something," Rand said. "Something."

No one answered but the wind.

The Caemlyn Road

Nynaeve had been a woman grown a long time, an orphan longer than that, and an only child all her life. The most crowded house she had ever lived in counted three occupants, and she had gone to live alone with Uncle Idris before she had even gotten her moon's blood. Now she traveled the Caemlyn Road in a party of eight. Eight people alongside her from sunrise to sunrise. Eight people she woke with, rode with, and ate beside every day, who knew when she dressed and undressed, or made mud and water. Eight people.

The Caemlyn Road was wide, but it felt narrow to Nynaeve.

By noon the next day, the road was snaking through a stretch of low hills that Lan called the Hills of Absher. On the other side of the hills ran the Taren, but they couldn't see or hear it. It was strange to think of the Taren as being somewhere other than the Two Rivers.

From time to time the warder led them atop one of the hills. They would dismount and get a short rest while he studied the road both ahead and behind them, and the surrounding countryside as well. Nynaeve would stretch and lie out, often beneath a tree, and try to enjoy a moment doing anything other than riding. She felt as if she had been on horseback for months. She missed her bed, her kitchen, her *people*. Her people who were without their Wisdom.

On the third day, with the sun high overhead, the group took their dinner while Lan conducted one of these hilltop surveys. It was the same as every

meal they had eaten so far: cheese, bread, a little dried meat. Nothing but water to drink, since the warder wouldn't let them make a fire for tea.

The boys clustered together against the trunk of a broad-branched oak tree. They had their silly weapons out and were talking about something or other the warder had taught them in those lessons. *Boys*. Egwene stayed close to the Aes Sedai, sitting on the grassier ground a bit farther out from the tree. The warder was off on his own, leaving Nynaeve and the gleeman. Since neither seemed much inclined to pair with the other, they found room with Egwene and Moiraine. So they all sat in two groups, eating their food and saying little under the early afternoon sun.

Nynaeve examined the Aes Sedai from across the blanket they had set their food on. She still had that unflappable arrogance that irked Nynaeve so, but she looked less regal than she had yesterday, which was less than she had the day before. Her slightly disheveled hair, the dirt on her traveling cloak, the small sag in her shoulders—the exhaustion was getting worse, and still the woman would not accept Nynaeve's help. The Wisdom sighed.

"Aes Sedai," she said, "you are weary. You sleep too little and do too much. Let me help. Something to clear the head and dim the burn in tired muscles. Some flatroot tea or—"

"No tea," Lan said as he rejoined them. "No fire. We can't see them yet, but they are back there, somewhere, a halfman or two and their trollocs. They already know which road we ride; no need to tell them exactly where we are."

Nynaeve opened her mouth but the Aes Sedai spoke first. "I am sure those would be a great help, Wisdom, but there is no need."

Nynaeve clenched her jaw and looked from Moiraine to Lan and back again.

"If you must go without sleep, then you had best give the body some help overcoming its own weakness."

The Aes Sedai said nothing, and an uncomfortable silence lingered over everyone. It was Perrin who finally spoke, from over by the tree.

“If they know we’re on the road,” he asked, “why not go straight across to Whitebridge? The road’s curving south, ain’t it?”

“Even Lan cannot travel as fast cross-country as by road,” Moiraine said, “especially not through the Hills of Absher. 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.”

“Have you seen a farm this morning?” Lan asked, looking first at Perrin and then east down the road. “Or even the smoke from a chimney? You’ve not, because we walk the wild country now. This road is the only sign of man or woman from Baerlon to Whitebridge. And this country, these hills, they are slow going. No, the Arinelle boasts one bridge this side of the Borderlands, and this road is the way.”

“And what,” asked the gleeman, “is to stop them from having someone waiting at Whitebridge?”

From the west they heard a keening horn split the sky, the wail of a mother burying her child. Lan whipped his head around to look back down the road behind them.

“Nothing stops them, gleeman,” the warder said. “We trust to luck. But now we know for certain there are trollocs behind us. Ten miles at most, I’d say.”

The Aes Sedai stood and dusted her hands. “It is time for us to move on.” She mounted her white mare, and the rest scrambled for their horses.

The horn blasted again, with others answering this time. Nynaeve felt her heart quicken and her face flush. *Calm yourself, woman. You can do no good if you’re panicked.* She thought of the bodies they’d had to bury after the attack on Emond’s Field, torn and mangled by trolloc blades and hands and teeth. She set her jaw and made ready to put her mount to a gallop right

away. Everyone else did likewise— everyone except the Aes Sedai and her man. Those two just 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.” He put a hand on his saddle, vaulted to the back of the black stallion, and galloped down the hill heading west. The horns sounded again.

Nynaeve watched him go, knowing that he left to protect them but nonetheless feeling less safe for his absence. The Aes Sedai looked after him for a moment, too, then drew a deep breath and turned her white mare 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.

Nynaeve found herself checking over her shoulder more than once, twisting to look for the warder, but he was already out of sight among the low hills and leafless trees. The horns called and answered once more behind them. They were closer this time, she was sure of it. Egwene looked back toward the sound, but the Aes Sedai gave no sign that she had even heard the horns. Nynaeve nodded to Egwene and looked back; Mat and Rand were doing the same, and Perrin was hunched as if bracing himself for a terrible blow. The gleeman looked ahead, but the grimness in his eyes told Nynaeve he had heard that harrowing wail. 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. Here and again the horns gave cry behind them, and closer each time. Nynaeve tried to stop thinking of how close, but the sound of the horns drove all other thoughts from her head. *Eight miles.* They marched on with night closing in all around them. The wail again. *Seven.* She felt her horse straining not to bolt, to maintain control. *Five miles.* The echo started to fade and Lan burst around the hill behind them at a gallop.

He came abreast of Moiraine, reining in his stallion. “At least three fists of trollocs, each led by a halfman. Maybe five. And they close the gap. We have, at the very most, one hour before they are on us. The bloodlust is on them, the way they ignore the midday sun.”

“This is wrong,” she said. She spoke softly, to herself, but Nynaeve was close enough to hear. “If they had that many before, why not use them at Emond’s Field? If they did *not*, how have 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 asked, again seeming to speak more to herself than to Lan. Her answer came quickly. From behind them came the long, angry moan of a trolloc horn— and then, from ahead of them, another horn answered. Then another. And another after that.

The Aes Sedai came to a stop, and the others followed her lead. Nynaeve looked around, trying to master her fear. *I am the Wisdom. I will see my people through this.* Perrin sat with his big shoulders still hunched, his eyes as wide as sunflowers. Rand kept turning his horse about with his hand around the hilt of his sword, an inch or two of the blade showing above the scabbard. Nynaeve was surprised to see that Mat was the most composed of the three, sitting tall on his grey stallion with his ear cocked as if he might hear in the cry of the horns some secret that held the key to their salvation. Egwene stayed near the Aes Sedai’s side, stroking her mare’s neck and making soothing sounds.

“What do we do now?” Nynaeve asked, locking eyes with the Moiraine. “Where do we go?”

The warder answered instead. “East and west are closed to us,” he said. “All that is left is north or south. To the south lie the Hills of Absher and the Taren, with no way to cross and no traffic by boat. To the north, we can reach the Arinelle before nightfall, or shortly thereafter. If the ice has broken at Maradon, we may be able to book passage on a trader’s boat. If.”

“There is a place the trollocs will not go,” the Aes Sedai said. “A place they dare not.”

“No, Moiraine,” he said. “I’ll not—” He broke off what he was saying as she motioned him over to her.

Another blast from the horns. Mat’s wild stallion reared up and tried to buck him, but Mat just leaned forward and whispered in the horse’s ear. Whatever he said, the horse didn’t rear again.

“They’re trying to frighten us,” the gleeman said with a growl in his voice. “They aim to scare us till we panic and run. They’ll have us, then.”

Every blast of a horn turned heads this way and that. Nynaeve tried to keep her focus on the Aes Sedai, who spoke softly with the warder, their faces almost touching. Nynaeve strained to hear their words but it was no use.

“We go north,” Moiraine said when their conference ended. She and Lan turned off the road and trotted their mounts into the surrounding hills.

The hills were low, but the way was all up and down, with never a flat stretch. They rode beneath bare-branched trees and through dead undergrowth. The horses struggled up one slope only to canter down the other. The warder set a hard pace, faster than he had on the road.

Branches lashed Nynaeve across her face and chest. Old creepers and vines caught her arms, and sometimes snagged her foot right out of the stirrup. The keening horns came ever closer, and ever more frequently.

The pace was hard but their progress was slow. For every foot forward, they traveled another two up or down, every step a scramble. And still the horns came nearer. *Two miles*, she thought. *Maybe less*. She tried to listen to the wind, but it told her nothing. No less than it had told her for months now.

After a time, the warder began peering first one way then another. Once he stood in his stirrups and stared back the way they had come. All Nynaeve saw were trees. The light was dimming; it would soon be night. When he

settled back into his saddle, Lan pushed back his cloak and fingered the hilt of his sword.

“Trollocs, and not far off,” he said over his shoulder. They topped a hill and started down the other side. “Probably 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,” the gleeman said.

Nynaeve motioned to Egwene to keep close. Side by side they tailed the warder and the Aes Sedai. Scattered stands of evergreens provided the only real cover. Once or twice Nynaeve started at the sight of a harmless grey tree trunks, turned to trollocs by her fears and fancies. The horns came nearer still; that was no fancy. They blew directly behind them now. Behind and closing.

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 disappearing out of sight. At its center, directly in front of Lan, rode a man in a black cloak, who seemed almost to be floating on his black horse instead of riding. The hood of his cloak was thrown back, and his face was a deathly white. Where his eyes should have been was just more white skin. *So that is a fade*. He— *it*— opened its mouth and hissed, drawing a black blade from a scabbard at its side. It waved the sword over its head and the line of trollocs scrambled forward. Nynaeve thought she might be sick.

Even before the fade moved, Lan had his sword in hand. “Behind me, now!” he said, and his stallion plunged down the slope toward the trollocs. “The Seven Towers! For the Seven!”

Nynaeve’s heart sank and her stomach roiled as she watched the boys, these three boys in her care, charge toward a seemingly endless line of trollocs. “Manetheren!” she heard Rand say, drawing his sword. “Manetheren!”

Perrin took up the cry. “Manetheren! Manetheren!” He held his axe up as he followed the warder and Rand.

The gleeman looked at Mat, but Mat kept his eyes on the trollocs. The gleeman shrugged and started down the hill. Nynaeve thought she saw something flash in his right hand but he was gone before she could tell. That left Mat. He drew his quarterstaff from his pack and stood high in his stirrups. He leaned forward, one hand wrapped in the reins and the mane of his horse, the other cradling his staff under his arm. When he let out his battle cry, it sent shivers down Nynaeve’s neck and shoulders. “*Carai an Caldazar! Carai an Ellisande! Al Ellisande!*”

The halfman let out a shriek, sharp and loud, as it rode forward. Lan raced to meet it, and the others moved to make their stand against the trollocs. They looked foolish and fragile and brave.

The warder’s blade met the halfman’s black steel with a flash of blue light like sheet lightning and a clang that tore the sky in two. The sea of trollocs parted around them, giving them a clear circle to fight in.

The boys did better against the trollocs than Nynaeve had expected. Rand felled a few with his sword, and Perrin a few more with his axe. Mat wielded his staff almost like a spear, jabbing and thrusting as much as swinging or trying to land a crushing blow. More than anything, she thought, they enjoyed the advantage of sitting a horse against foes on the ground. The gleeman seemed to be using his horse itself as a weapon, urging it to kick at the trollocs around it. The trollocs tried to use their catchpoles and hooks to bring the riders to the ground, but with little success.

Moiraine kicked her mare forward, and Egwene and Nynaeve followed. They raced up behind the men, riding in the relative calm of their wake. The Aes Sedai’s face was hard; in fact, it reminded Nynaeve of the warder. She couldn’t see his face, but she knew it would be as stone. Moiraine moved her hands before her in strange patterns, like some intricate dance with no music, though Nynaeve thought she could feel a rhythm in the

movements. Lightning came down then, striking in the heart of the swarm. Nynaeve was glad it was not too close. She didn't care how skilled this woman was with the One Power, lightning went where it wanted. Moiraine might be able to call it, but once it crackled into being, it went where it wanted. And Nynaeve, for one, did not fancy getting split open by an errant bolt of lightning.

Closer to them, flames appeared from nowhere to envelop trollocs who were too near for a lightning strike. One after another, trollocs disappeared behind a curtain of fire then burst with a roar, leaving misshapen forms lying still on the ground. Nynaeve looked at Egwene, who held her belt knife in her hand, teeth bared almost as fiercely as the trollocs'. *Fat lot of good that tiny thing will do if the trollocs ever reach us.* Still, she pulled her own knife out and held it at the ready. She took a deep breath and leaned forward, trying to will the sea of trollocs to part for them.

At first, the Aes Sedai's attacks were effective. Not even half of the charging trollocs were able to reach the boys, and those they were able to strike down from their saddles. Fires roared, and the trollocs howled in rage and fury. Above the din, Nynaeve could still hear the clash of the warder's blade against the halfman's. To her right, the air flared blue, again and again, in time with the clashing of the swords.

Soon, though, the trollocs began to overwhelm them with sheer numbers. As more avoided the Aes Sedai's fire and lightning, the boys looked to be having a harder and harder time staying alive and a horse. She had lost track of the gleeman completely, and she could see that the catchpoles would have the boys soon. Once they were pulled down to the ground, she feared they would have little chance against these shadowspawn.

Nynaeve saw Mat pulled down off of Cloud, and Jon Thane's stallion reared up and screamed. A hook almost caught Rand but he was able to slice it in two. Perrin had a hook in his cloak; she could see it pulling him back and to the left. But he managed to stay in his saddle, hacking away with that massive axe. *He always was a strong one.* When Rand finally

went down, Nynaeve charged ahead of the Aes Sedai before she could even decide what to do. She just knew she had to help.

A trolloc dashed in and seized her leg, forcing her foot free of the stirrup. Panting, she yelled at her horse to go faster. The trolloc pulled her down to her left, but she managed to keep her right leg hooked over the saddle. She held her hands as tight as she could on the pommel, but it was difficult with the knife in her hand. She felt her thighs stretch farther than they had any right to stretch; she'd likely have at least some tearing in the muscle. No matter how she strained, she could not get back into her saddle. Desperate, she took her right hand off the pommel and swept her knife blindly back toward the trolloc. She drew blood— she could see it, so dark as to be nearly black, streaming down its arm— but the thing squeezed her leg even more tightly. It was too strong. She would never get free of it.

And then, for no reason she could see, the trolloc let go, threw up its hands, and screamed. All of the trollocs screamed, all at once, a howl of death and pain. It was the most awful sound Nynaeve had ever heard; she almost sicked up.

All around them, trollocs fell writhing to the ground, tearing at their hair, clawing their own faces, pulling at the steel piercing their skin until it tore free. All of the trollocs. Biting at the ground, snapping at nothing, howling, howling, howling.

Then Nynaeve saw the halfman. It still sat upright in its saddle and flailed its black sword about, but it was the wild flailing of a chicken after slaughter. The halfman spouted a thick, almost clear blood from its neck like a gurgling spring. Its head was gone.

“The thing still isn't dead, not completely,” the gleeman said, appearing to Nynaeve's left without warning. “Won't be till nightfall. So I've heard, anyway. So I've heard.”

Lan was back at the Aes Sedai's side. They spoke quietly with their heads together. Egwene walked Bela over to Nynaeve but didn't say anything. After a moment, the Aes Sedai nodded to the warder and he looked up.

“Wisdom, gleeman, girl, we must go.” Without waiting he started up the next hill at a trot. Halfway up he stopped and turned around. He called out so the boys could hear him, too. “Ride!” he said. “This is not all of them!”

The dirge of the horns proved the warder right, coming still from the east, the west, and the south. Nynaeve heard them clearly, even above the shrieks of the trollocs on the ground. She looked in the carnage for sign of the boys. Perrin still sat in his saddle, and Rand had already mounted again. Mat was the only one still on the ground, though he had at least found his feet. At first she thought he was scratching at his neck, but soon realized he was getting himself free of the noose that had pulled him down. He rubbed at his throat but scrambled into his saddle unaided. *I'll have to look at that later.*

The horns bayed like hounds with the scent of a deer. Hounds closing in. Checking more closely on Mat and the others would have to wait.

If Lan had set a hard pace before, he doubled it now, till the horses scrabbled uphill faster than they had gone down before, then nearly threw themselves at the other side. But still the horns came ever nearer, until Nynaeve could hear the mangled, throaty shouts of the trollocs whenever the horns paused. At the top of the next hill, Nynaeve stole a glance back and saw trollocs cresting the one behind them. They paused at the top, making a long and ugly silhouette along the hilltop. Towering above them all were three fades on horseback. *Three!*

No more than 200 paces separated the two parties. The halfmen's black swords rose as one. Trollocs boiled down the slope, thick, triumphant cries rising, catchpoles bobbing above them as they ran.

Moiraine climbed down from her saddle and faced the trolloc horde. Calmly she removed something from her pouch, unwrapped it— a small ivory figurine. Nynaeve did not know what the woman was doing, but she was like to get herself killed. The Aes Sedai put her hands together so they swallowed the figurine, then set her feet and raised her hands above her head. She stood on her toes, stretching as far toward the sky as she could,

then brought her arms down, bending at the knees and driving her hands into the earth.

The ground rang like an iron kettle struck by a mallet. The hollow clang dwindled, then disappeared. For an instant, 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 earth trembled beneath them. *This is Aes Sedai work, for true. Burn her for bringing this to Emond's Field, her and her man.* The tremble became a shaking that set the trees around them quivering. Clover stumbled and nearly fell; Nynaeve had to grab her reins and mane just to keep her seat. Even the Aes Sedai's and warder's mounts staggered like Jac al' Caar in his cups.

The Aes Sedai was on one knee, her head bent down, her hands still an inch or two deep in the dirt. She was completely still, for all that the earth shook and shivered around her. The ground began to roll, springing out from in front of her, 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, billowing 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.

The trollocs fell, but the fades did not seem to notice the rolling earth at all. They moved forward in a line, their dead-black horses never missing a step, every hoof in unison. Trollocs rolled on the ground all about them, howling and grabbing at the hillside that seemed to have come to life, but still the fades came slowly on.

Moiraine stood and the earth stilled, but she was not done. She pointed to the hollow between the hills, and flame erupted from the ground in 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 them from the trollocs. Even on top of the hill, Nynaeve had to put her hands up

to protect her face from the heat. She heard screams of agony and felt her heart skip in sympathy. Then she realized the screams were coming from the black horses that carried the fades. They screamed at the fire, reared up, kicked, tried to shake loose of their riders, to lead them back up the hill, but the fades kept beating at them, pulling violently on the reins, doing whatever they could think of to force them through the flames.

“Blood and ashes,” Mat said faintly. Nynaeve was too stunned to even scold him for his language.

The heat was overwhelming. She felt her woolens, rough against the skin of her arms, back, thighs. *How is— How do I wear these? This is horrible.* She rubbed her forearms together, trying to scratch out some relief. *This isn’t right.* The fades’ horses kept screaming. *Not natural.* Some trollocs had caught fire and were now running about madly, engulfed in flames. *We shouldn’t be here.* Nynaeve was at a loss as to how she would keep these children safe. She just knew that the Aes Sedai had dragged them to a place none of them belonged.

She looked over toward the Aes Sedai, ready to yell about the fine mess she had led them into. Moiraine was on the ground, limp, with Lan’s hands under her arms, trying to stand her up. Nynaeve started to offer her help, but he waved her off.

“Go on,” he said loudly enough for everyone to hear, even over the screams of the fades’ horses. His voice was harsh, but he looked so gentle as he lifted the Aes Sedai to her saddle. “The fire won’t burn forever. Hurry! Every minute counts!”

The flames roared as if they meant to do just that, whatever the warder said. Nynaeve wanted to help, but she did not argue. She and the others galloped northward as fast as they could make their horses go. The trollocs’ horns blasted in the distance, but they seemed less menacing behind a wall of fire.

Lan and Moiraine soon caught up with them, though Lan led Moiraine’s mare by the reins while the Aes Sedai swayed and held the pommel of her saddle with both hands. “I will be alright soon,” she said to their anxious

looks. She sounded tired but confident, and her eyes betrayed no worry. “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. Nynaeve guessed that walking any faster would unhorse Moiraine, or at least that Lan thought so. She rode forward beside the Aes Sedai, steadying her with a hand.

“Aes Sedai,” she said, “will you accept my help now? You’ve saved us all with your fire. Now let one of us save you from what calling that fire has done to you. You can barely sit up.”

“Unnecessary,” Moiraine said. “I just need a moment to catch my breath.”

It went on like this for a while, at least a couple of hills. Finally the stubborn woman relented. Nynaeve reached into her cloak and pulled out a packet of flatroot tea and andille root she had prepared in hopes that the Aes Sedai would eventually swallow her pride enough to let the Wisdom help.

She had Moiraine eat the andille root right away, chewing it as much as possible before swallowing. The tea would have to wait, though Nynaeve suspected it would be the more helpful of the two.

After giving what aid she could, Nynaeve fell back with the others. She saw the questions in their eyes but left them unanswered. Whatever was said and done between the Wisdom and her patient was for them and them alone.

They rode in silence, covering ground as quickly as they could. After a while, the hills grew smaller and the land began to level out, but instead of taking the opportunity to pick up their pace, Lan brought them to a stop. Nynaeve went to check on Moiraine, but Lan gave her a cold stare and shook his head. She watched as the two of them rode ahead and put their heads together. Moiraine’s gestures made it clear they were arguing. The Emond’s Fielders were all carefully looking elsewhere, but the gleeman was like Nynaeve; he couldn’t stop staring. Nynaeve frowned; who knew what might come of an argument between an Aes Sedai and a warder? Not much good, she guessed. The gleeman muttered under his breath, looking back occasionally at the way they had come. Nynaeve sighed and nudged her

horse back toward the children. The gleeman lingered a moment, then followed.

The others were quiet as Nynaeve joined them. After a few minutes, Egwene broke the silence. “Those things,” she said to Rand, “those things you shouted at the trollocs...” She trailed off, looking unsure about how to finish her question.

“What about them?” Rand asked, looking rather sheepish. “Mat must have repeated that Manetheren story ten times.”

“And badly,” the gleeman said. 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, really,” said Perrin. “Moiraine Sedai says we’re all descended from those Manetheren people. They fought the Dark One, and we’re fighting the Dark One. That gives us the right.”

“I wasn’t talking about that,” Egwene said. “What— what was it you were shouting, Mat?”

Nynaeve remembered that. It was different than the other boys, or the warder.

Mat shrugged. “I don’t remember.” He stared at them. “Well, I don’t. It’s all foggy. I don’t know what it was, nor where it came from, nor what it meant.” He laughed a little. “It don’t— that is, 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. “Maybe you’re right. Strange what you can imagine at a time like that, isn’t it?”

“*Carai an Caldazar.*” They turned to see Moiraine returned from her conversation with Lan. The warder was right behind 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 war cry of Manetheren, and the war cry of its last king. Eldrene was called the Rose of the Sun.” Moiraine smiled then, looking at Egwene and Mat. Nynaeve frowned. *Deeper and deeper they are woven into this woman’s designs.* “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; 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. Mat looked far less pleased, a deep scowl on his face.

“I can’t say that I have ever heard the like of this,” the gleeman said. “Another time I might even make a story out of it, but right now...” He shook his head. “Do you intend to make camp here, Aes Sedai?”

“No,” she said, 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,” Moiraine said calmly. She turned to the warder. “I am not strong enough to make another stand. Not yet, not without rest. And neither myrddraal nor trolloc will enter that place.”

Lan raised a hand as if to cut her off, then sighed and let it fall instead. “Very well,” he said. “You are right, I suppose, but I would rather there were any other choice.”

“And I no less,” she said. “Gather around me, all of you. As close as you can. Closer.”

They all moved closer to the Aes Sedai, but she was not satisfied, not until every horse was touching noses and every rider was leaning forward. Then she gave them a small nod, stood in her stirrups, and raised her hand to the sky.

The air above them seemed to shimmer, and Nynaeve felt a breeze and a tingle. The shimmer took the shape of a funnel above them, or a whirlpool in the air. The narrow end dove into the center of their ragged circle, then splayed back out wide, so it seemed to be pointing up instead of down. The edge expanded, going under the horses and wrapping around behind them.

The tingle followed the shimmer: first down the front of Nynaeve's body, from her forehead to her feet; then under her, through the back of her thighs and her backside; then up her back to her neck. When it reached the base of her skull, Moiraine brought her hand down and pointed to the west. A tube, a spiraling stream of shimmering light— or was it a shimmer of air?— followed where the Aes Sedai pointed, over their heads, leaving twigs and leaves whirling in its wake. As the invisible whirlwind vanished from sight, the Aes Sedai settled back into her saddle with a sigh.

“To the trollocs,” she said, “our scents and our tracks will seem to follow that. The halfman will see through it in time, but by then...”

“By then we will have lost ourselves.” Lan ducked his head and rubbed his chin. “Alright, then. Follow me and keep quiet. It will ruin our ruse if we let the trollocs hear us.”

He led the way north again, not at the crashing pace they had been making, but rather at the brisk walk he had set on the Caemlyn Road. The ground continued to even out until they were walking on flat, heavily wooded land. They stopped traveling in a straight line, instead meandering over hard ground and rocky outcrops. Lan no longer let them force their way through tangles of brush, insisting that they take the time to make their way around. Now and again he dropped to the rear to study the trail they made.

Nynaeve rode beside the Aes Sedai. The more dangerous this adventure became, the more she resented Moiraine. But the more dangerous it

became, the more Moiraine gave of herself to keep them all safe. It left her tired and vulnerable, and worked to endear the woman to Nynaeve. Which Nynaeve resented even more.

The Aes Sedai rode with her shoulders slumped, and she had both hands wrapped around reins and pommel, swaying with her horse's every step. Laying the false trail may have seemed a small thing beside shaking the earth and creating a wall of fire, but it had plainly taken a great deal out of her— and she had little enough strength left after the first battle.

Nynaeve kept her eyes on the Aes Sedai, her reluctant patient, and so did not see what lay ahead until they were upon it. When she did, she just stared. 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 peaks here and there. Leafless vines and creepers covered it all in thick layers. *A cliff? Moiraine will never be able to climb those vines, and even if she could, the horses couldn't.*

As they rode closer, she saw one of the peaks more clearly. It was not an outcrop; it was a *tower*, with an odd, pointed dome on the top. The others must have noticed it too; she heard Perrin gasp, and Rand say, "A city!" The cliff was a city wall, and the spires were guard towers atop it. It had to be ten times as big as Baerlon. *Fifty* times.

"Yes," Egwene said, nodding, "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."

It was as Perrin said. Under almost every low place in the wall was a brush-covered hill of rubble from the collapsed wall above. No two of the guard towers were the same height.

"I wonder what city it was," Egwene said. "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.” She stared at the massive walls, seeming almost unaware of the others— even of Nynaeve, who supported her in the saddle with a hand on her arm. “Later Aridhol died. This place goes by another name, now.”

“What name?” Mat asked.

“Here,” Lan said. He stopped his black stallion 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 sounds, then looked at the sun, more than 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 crossed into the city. “Shadar Logoth,” she said. “It is called Shadar Logoth.”

Into Shadar Logoth

Even broken, the city took Mat's breath away. Every building— every one left standing, at least— seemed a palace to his eye, grand, sculpted from pale marble. Most had at least one dome, and some had as many as four or five. He saw long walks lined with columns, walks leading to towers that scratched at the bellies of the clouds. At every intersection stood a bronze fountain, or the alabaster spire of a monument, or a statue on a pedestal.

Mat wondered how such a place could stand so totally abandoned that people didn't even know it existed. And this place certainly was abandoned, just as Perrin had said. Those bronze fountains were dry, those monuments toppled, those statues broken and worn down by time. The only sound he heard was the crunching of broken paving stones under the horses' hooves. Not so much as a pigeon moved, and weeds, mainly old and dead, sprouted from cracks in walls as well as pavement. More buildings had roofs fallen in than had them whole, and tumbled walls spilled fans of brick and stone into the streets. This place was as dead as the Manetheren Moiraine Sedai had told tales of. *Carai an Caldazar.*

They traveled a fair way into the city before Lan called for them to halt and swung out of his saddle. He stood in front of a white stone building; Mat guessed it must have been twice as big as The Stag and Lion in its day. *The Stag and Lion. Did I really think that place so large? Burn me, but I wouldn't wonder if some of these buildings could hold the entire Green inside their walls.* Mat brought Cloud to a stop alongside Egwene's mare and looked more closely at the building. The upper floors were just a hollow shell, but the ground floor seemed sound enough. It would make for decent shelter.

Moiraine Sedai eyed the building closely before nodding. “This will do.”

As soon as she gave her approval, Lan lifted Moiraine Sedai out of her saddle and cradled her in his arms. “Bring the horses inside,” he said. “Find a room in the back to use for a stable.” With that he vanished inside carrying the Aes Sedai.

Nynaeve scrambled down and hurried after him, clutching her bag of herbs and ointments.

“‘Bring the horses inside,’ indeed,” Thom said softly. He climbed down from his horse, stiff and slow, and knuckled his back. He looked at Mat and the rest and added, “Well?” Thom took the reins of his horse in one hand and of Moiraine Sedai’s in the other and walked inside.

Mat slid from his saddle and took Cloud by the reins. The doorway was big enough for a barn and led to a huge room, taking the entire width of the building. The tile floor was caked in dirt and dust, and the few ragged wall hangings looked as if they would fall apart at a touch. Lan had made a place in the nearest corner for Moiraine Sedai with his cloak and hers. Nynaeve knelt next to her, digging in her bag and talking to Lan, who stood on the other side of the Aes Sedai off to the side and watched.

“And if I don’t?” she asked him. “I help anyone who needs my help, whether I like them or no.”

“I made no accusation, Wisdom. ‘Have a care with your herbs,’ I said. No more.”

She turned on him, and Mat looked at his shoes to avoid catching her eye. “The fact is, she needs my herbs, and so do you.” Her voice was a razor, and the longer she talked, the sharper it grew. “The fact is, she can do only so much, even with her One Power, and she has done about as much as she can without collapsing. The fact is, your sword cannot help her now, but my herbs can.”

“Easy, Lan,” Moiraine Sedai said. “She means no harm. She simply does not know.”

“There are many things I do not know,” Nynaeve said. “What thing is this?”

“For one,” said the Aes Sedai, “all I truly need is a little rest. For another, I agree with you. Your skills and knowledge will be more useful than I thought. Now, if you have something that will help me sleep for an hour and not leave me groggy?”

“Hmm, yes. Wormwood would be too strong. I think a weak tea of foxtail, marisin, and—”

Mat missed the last of it as he followed Thom into a room behind the first, a chamber just as big and even emptier. Here was only the dust, thick and undisturbed until they came. Not even the tracks of birds or small animals marked the floor.

Mat scratched the back of Cloud’s head and whispered some nonsense syllables into his ear before taking his saddle off. Rand was unsaddling his own stallion and the warder’s, the gleeman had his horse and Moiraine Sedai’s, and Perrin his own and Nynaeve’s. But Egwene had dropped her reins in the middle of the room and walked over to a doorway directly across from where they had just entered. The room had a third doorway in the wall to their right.

Egwene ducked her head through and said, “Alley.” Of course, Mat could see that much where he stood. The last doorway, though, was only a black rectangle. He had no idea what lay beyond it. Egwene walked to the threshold, then paused before going through slowly. She jumped back out, brushing old cobwebs from her hair and face. “Nothing in there,” she said, coughing. Mat laughed a little and finished up with Cloud.

When he was done, Mat flopped down on the saddle he had just laid on the floor. Sitting in silence, he heard those words echo in his mind again and again. *Why would I say that? How’d I even know how?* He looked at Egwene. *For the honor of the Rose of the Sun.* She smiled at him, that look

she got when she knew a secret. *She said she understood, or almost.* It was not a secret Mat wanted in on.

“Mat? Mat!” It was Rand. Mat gave a start and turned to him. “Are you alright? I was asking what you thought this place used to be.”

“What?” Mat asked. “Oh. Aye. Sorry, I— I was just thinking.”

“Thinking?” Perrin hooted from where he was putting a hackamore on Nynaeve’s mare. “Sleeping, more like.”

“I was *thinking* about, well, about what happened back there. About those words I...” Everybody turned to look at him then. He shifted uneasily.

“Well, you heard what Moiraine Sedai said. As if some dead man was speaking with my mouth. I don’t like it.” Perrin chuckled then, but Mat failed to see the humor. He felt a flush in his face growing hotter by the second, and the walls in this room that had seemed so large a few minutes ago now felt close and confining.

“Aemon’s war cry, she said, right?” Perrin said. “Maybe you’re Aemon come back again.”

“Take it back!” Mat wasn’t sure why he was yelling.

“Take it— what? Why, the way you’re always on about how dull Emond’s Field is, I’d think you’d like that— being a king and a-a-a hero reborn.”

Mat scratched at his neck where the trolloc’s noose had nearly ended him. The flush was almost unbearable; he thought the hot blood might burn right through his skin.

“That is dangerous talk,” Thom said. Mat had forgotten the old gleeman was there. “Stupid talk. The dead *can* be reborn, or take a living body. It is no thing to speak of lightly. ‘The old blood,’ she said. The *blood*, not a dead man. It was your roots, boy. Your roots. A— a line running from you to your father, to your grandfather, right on back to Manetheren. Maybe beyond.

Well, now you know your family is old. You'd best let it go at that and be glad."

"Do you think—" Rand started. He looked at Mat, then turned away looking embarrassed. "That is, do you think this is why the Dark One is, well, you know, why with all that's happened to us... I mean to say, could this be why the Dark One is after us? Because of the blood? Mat's blood? Is that what it's after?"

Mat couldn't take anymore. *Stupid al'Thor. Doesn't know what he's talking about.* He shot up and out into the alley, running as fast as he could. *Liked it better when he didn't talk much at all.* He heard Egwene call his name behind him but he didn't stop, or even slow down. *The Dark One is **not** after me. My blood.* His eyes were blurry— were these tears of rage? sorrow? guilt?— as he followed the alley out onto a larger street. This one was narrower than the road they had come in on and seemed to curve around to the north.

Mat ran and he ran. His curving street crossed several smaller ones; he kept on running. When his street finally met a bigger one, he turned right. He kept turning onto bigger streets and ignoring smaller ones, running until his lungs and legs were on fire. Finally, he collapsed onto a dry and broken granite fountain. It sat in the center of a massive intersection where three wide streets met, each with a strip of weeds and tall grass down the middle. He figured he must be near the center of the city. Everything here was big, in every direction.

He had left the others looking only to escape their conversation and company, but now he found himself curious about this city, and set out to explore a bit. He closed his eyes and spun around, letting chance set his bearing. When he stopped, he opened them again and marched forward. In this direction, the sun was at his back, and the afternoon shadows stretched before him. He followed their lead, marveling at the size and majesty of the ruined city. He wandered in and out of structures chosen on a whim, usually the biggest he could find. Some he understood, and some not. The mansions were easy to recognize, but he didn't know what to make of a huge, white

dome as big as a hill that had one monstrous room inside. And what was the walled place, open to the sky and big enough to hold all of Emond's Field, surrounded by row upon row upon row of stone benches?

When at last he sat down on the steps of an old mansion— the biggest one he had seen yet, surely— Mat guessed that an hour or so of light remained. His feet were sore and his legs were tired, and he was well and truly lost. He knew nothing more about the dead man's tongue in his mouth than when he had set out. And he was famished, with no food in sight. *I need better plans.* He scratched behind his ear. *I need plans.* He started to laugh at his own foolishness but the sound caught in his throat. Two trollocs were walking on a cross street about thirty paces away. They hadn't seen him, but they surely would if he didn't find cover. And he didn't even have his quarterstaff. *Plans. Plans plans plans.*

Mat slid to his right, kneeling behind the large stone banister running along the edge of the stairs. He crept up toward the front doorway, step by step, trusting to the banister to hide him. When he reached the portico, he raised his head slowly over the top of the railing. Below he saw at least half a dozen trollocs moving slowly, in fits and starts, as if confused. *Those buggers aren't even supposed to come into this bloody city.* Mat ducked back down and headed for the entrance. Surely he could find somewhere to hide inside; the place was just so *big*.

Staying low, Mat made it through the doorway without being noticed. On the other side was a large, long foyer. It stood fifteen paces by half a dozen, and was taller than it was wide. The top half of the opposite wall was an intricately carved window, round, with some sort of abstract floral design. The top right of the latticework had crumbled a bit over the years, but Mat imagined that even new it had let in enough morning sun to light the entire foyer. The bottom half of the wall was taken up almost entirely by a wide, arched doorway leading into a grand courtyard. Mat checked once over his shoulder and hurried through.

The courtyard was clearly meant to be a garden, the different patches set off with borders made of scores— hundreds— of small, colored stones. Now,

though, the patches were all the same— weeds and tall grasses. A pair of stone walkways wove from one end to the other, and a row of benches lined each wall to the left and right. In the center stood a well, its walls broken and crumbled almost to the ground. From within the courtyard Mat could see that, as tall as it was, this building had just two storeys, each with very high ceilings. Ground floor windows to his left and right looked into hallways that ran alongside the garden. First floor balconies hung over the courtyard; that level was probably bedchambers and salons and such, like how the bedrooms were on the top floor of the Winespring Inn.

The courtyard ended with another doorway, the mirror image of the one he had just walked through, only twice as large. On the other side was the great hall, one room as tall as both storeys put together, thirty paces deep if it was a step. Its tall, arched roof was largely intact, made of some dark-stained, well-worn wood. It was broken in several places, but the room felt more indoors than out. The pale marble walls were bare, and it made the room feel cold and abandoned, even haunted. A shiver ran down his spine and Mat suddenly felt very lonely. He heard a reedy, high-pitched whistle— the wind coming through a hole in the roof?— and decided he'd best find his way back to the group. But first, he would need something to take the place of his staff, something that would at least give him a chance to defend himself should any more trollocs appear.

Several doorways connected the great hall to other rooms in the house. A quick survey revealed what Mat guessed were a kitchen, a granary, a few simple bedchambers, and a storage room. The odd collection of debris in the last— rusted metal in odd shapes, splinters of wood long since chewed apart by rats and other pests, even a few old stone boards— gave Mat brief hope that he might find a weapon. Kicking up all the dust in the room, though, uncovered nothing useful. It wasn't until he wound his way back to the long, windowed hallways that ran beside the courtyard that Mat found the room he wanted: the armory.

The armory was by no means fully stocked, but it still had a fair share of weapons. Some were in poor repair, with rusted metal or rotten wood. But some seemed ready to use. He found a set of steel knuckles, but was

looking for something that didn't require him to get quite so close to a trolloc. A sword had a fine, sharp blade, but it was too heavy to run with, or even walk quickly. Then, under a rotten wooden shield, he found it: a long dagger with a gilded hilt and a small ruby in the pommel. It needed sharpening and a shine, but it would do nicely. With the ruby, it doubled as weapon and treasure. *Mayhap my luck is turning up, then.* He put it in his cloak, took a breath, and turned back toward the mansion's entrance.

Walking out seemed to take much longer than walking in had, and Mat began to wonder why exactly he had been in such a hurry to leave. But when he came out of the hallway and saw the long shadows through the main doorway, he wanted even more than before to be back with his friends. And the warder and Aes Sedai, of course.

Mat edged around the foyer wall until he stood at the edge of the entrance, facing back toward the garden. He counted to three in his mind and then snuck a look out at the city. It was hard to be sure in the failing light, but he saw no sign of trollocs. He listened, but all he heard was the wind, stronger now and fair howling. Full darkness would only make it harder to be certain, so Mat set out right away. He skipped down to the base of the front steps and realized that he didn't even know which way to turn first.

"Bollocks!" He kicked at the dirt of the street. There was nothing for it but to pick a direction and move. He turned to his right—the mansion had been on his left when he first saw it, hadn't it?—and stopped. Two trollocs were charging him, twenty paces away and closing fast. Their white skin and the glinting pins in their faces stood in sharp relief against the shadowy background of twilight. One had a sword made of crude black iron, a two-handed blade it held high over its shoulder as it ran. The other had a mace in its right hand and an oaken shield in its left, and it beat the two together as it ran. A roar from the first one filled Mat's ears with fever and gravel and mud. Even the trollocs' footsteps sounded like thunder.

Bollocks.

Mat took a step back and turned to run. He felt blindly in his cloak for the dagger, stumbled, and almost didn't see Lan bearing down on him, sword in hand and horse at a gallop.

"Down, farm boy, down!" Lan's shouting was barely audible over the sound of his stallion's hooves.

Mat fell to a knee and rolled forward. The stallion came within a foot or two of trampling him, and the sound was deafening. Mat reached a hand out, stabilized himself, and turned his head. Lan charged right at the trolloc that held the mace and shield. Mat expected to see Lan swerve at the last moment to create an angle for his sword, but instead he rode his mount straight through the thing's chest. Mat heard the crunch of bone and the wet, muddy sound of flesh being trampled.

Above those sounds rang the sharp clang of Lan's sword meeting the other trolloc's black blade, accompanied by the same blue flash Mat had seen in the battle a few hours earlier. Neither weapon found flesh, and the two spun around to charge again. Another blue flash, another ringing crash, but this time the trolloc's blade went flying through the air, spinning and landing a good ten paces away. With no weapon, the monster abandoned any thought of winning the confrontation and turned its hopes instead to escape. Before its sword had landed, it was already back up to full speed, fleeing, while Lan was still bringing his stallion to a stop and turning around. The trolloc was fast, but no match for the horse. Lan quickly caught up and ran his sword through the back of the thing's neck. Mat was looking in its eyes when the blade erupted from the bottom of its throat. Lan's horse slowed to a walk, then stopped right in front of Mat.

"Curse you, farm boy," Lan said. "You've made a long day all the longer. Come. Night is falling, trollocs walk in Shadar Logoth, and we are a long way from our companions." He reached a hand out and pulled Mat up to sit behind him atop the stallion. "Hold tight. Something worse than shadowspawn plagues this city."

The ride was rough, with nothing under his seat and the back of the saddle between his legs. But riding bareback was second nature for Mat, and this was hardly much worse. He grabbed Lan around the waist and leaned into him.

“How did you find me?” he shouted into the wind.

“This city has little shrubbery for you to disturb, or grass for you to trample. Still, you hardly took care to hide your tracks.” Lan’s voice was hard to hear over the wind and the stallion’s pounding hooves. “Finding you was not so difficult. The real matter was finding you in time.”

“Well, you did that,” Mat said. “You have my thanks.”

Lan grunted. Mat felt it more than heard it, felt it in his chest and hands. “Your thanks,” the warder said, “is all I’ve ever wanted.”

“Then you can die happy.”

“No one dies happy, farm boy.”

Mat had no response to that, so he just held on a bit tighter. They had not been riding long when Mat felt the tickle of goose bumps run from his wrists all the up to the back of his neck. Something was watching him. He spun his head around, looking for a face, for eyes. He saw nothing, but he felt them staring at him from the shadows. They were everywhere.

“Do you feel that?” he asked.

“Aye, lad. This city haunts itself. Pay it no mind. The searching eyes will not find us once we return to camp.”

The horse seemed to swallow the road whole with its legs, but however fast he ran, the watchers kept pace with them. Mat continued to search in vain for the eyes, for the faces that held them. Nothing moved, no matter how hard he looked, but still he felt them— watching, eager, hungry. Either he

and Lan were being followed, or watchers camped in every shadow they passed. Mat did not know which would be worse.

The sun was low now, mostly hidden by the ruins of the city. Now and again they would reach a crossroads, or pass a building laid low by time, and the sun would reach them, bright and blinding. At those moments, the watchers seemed to disappear, or at least close their eyes. But as soon as the stallion plunged back into the shadows, the eyes resumed their watching.

At last, with twilight falling, Mat saw the white stone building he had fled from. It had just been earlier in the afternoon, but it felt like days ago. Lan slowed the stallion to a canter as they approached. Then, between one step and the next, the watching eyes vanished. Lan walked his horse straight through the front door. In the large front room he dismounted, helped Mat down, then led the stallion to the stable area they had set up.

A small fire burned in the middle of the tile floor. The smoke vanished through a hole in the ceiling, and Mat guessed most of the heat left the same way. Everyone was there, gathered around the flames. Egwene was warming her hands and gave a start as they entered. She started to stand, then sat back down. Rand and Perrin looked at each other with furrowed brows but said nothing. Thom was chewing at his pipe stem, muttering something, no doubt about what a fool Mat was.

“You witless ass!” the Wisdom said, breaking the silence. “Why would you run off like that? Have you been hurt? I don’t even know which answer I prefer. See here, where is your sense, boy?”

“Enough, Wisdom,” Lan said as he rejoined them. Nynaeve stared at him, her mouth hanging open. Lan didn’t notice, or if he did, he didn’t care. “The problem of the farm boy is solved, for now. We have other problems that are not. Moiraine Sedai?”

They all turned to the Aes Sedai. As usual, her face showed nothing of her mind or heart. But she did look a fair bit stronger, more flush, than when Mat had seen her last. She even stood, after a fashion, leaning up against the wall. Nynaeve’s herbs must have helped. “You should not have done what

you did,” she said to Mat, her voice flat and clear. “We will speak of it later. What say you, Lan?”

“I saw nine trollocs. Seven I slew. The others I let go for fear of falling farther behind the boy. They were not near here, but that doesn’t mean they will not come this way now that they are through the gate. I saw no myrddraal, but what else could drive them into this place? And what would drive the myrddraal?”

“You said it was safe,” Egwene said, scrambling to her feet. Rand stood then, as did Perrin. Thom stayed seated, chewing at his pipe. Egwene looked at Mat and then at her shoes before turning her eyes back on the Aes Sedai. “You said Aridhol was an ally of Manetheren, and trollocs wouldn’t come into the city, and— ”

“Child, to say a place frightens trollocs is not the same as saying it is safe, now is it?” Moiraine Sedai said. “Still, I did not expect them to enter so easily or quickly. They are more driven than we knew. Perhaps I *should* have known...” She trailed off, her eyes unfocused and distant. Mat didn’t know if she were simply lost in thought, or perhaps still drained from the battle. After all, Nynaeve’s herbs could do only so much. ““Not near.”” She turned to Lan. “How far? Never mind. We need to know more. This guesswork will be the death of us. Scout a bit. Give me something to decide about.”

The warder nodded and disappeared into the stable room again. He was back and out into the night before any of those left behind broke the silence.

It was Perrin who finally spoke. “Moiraine Sedai, what *is* this place?”

The Aes Sedai looked at them each in turn and sighed softly. “It is too long a story to tell in full, too long and too grim, and only fragments are still remembered, even in Tar Valon. Even those fragments may be fictions. The whole of the truth is lost to the turning of the Wheel. But I can share some of it with you.”

She sat down at the fire and arranged her skirts. Mat looked at Perrin and shrugged. Soon they were circled around the fire. They all leaned in to listen, all save the gleeman, who leaned back and watched Moiraine Sedai through narrowed eyes.

“This place was once named Aridhol, capital city in the kingdom of the same name, one of the Ten Nations, the lands that made the Second Covenant, the lands that stood against the Dark One from the first days after the Breaking of the World.

“It was one of the great cities of Asur, beautiful and grand. Some of these buildings are even ogier made. But Aridhol’s greatness lay not only in its beauty and size, but in its spirit. Aridhol was a close friend of Manetheren, and known throughout the world for its vigilance and vigor in fighting the Dark One’s forces. That strength of spirit met its most difficult challenge during the Trolloc Wars.

“In the days when the shadow armies were in desperate and deadly battle with Aramaelle, Aridhol’s neighbor to the north and one of two Borderland nations of the time, in those days a cry rose up from within Aridhol— ‘The victory of the Light is all.’ It was a surge, a movement, a crusade, an idea that set fire to a collective spirit left dry and brittle by more than a hundred years of war. They would use the tactics of the Dark One against itself. They would follow no code of honor, or morality, or love.

“Aridhol brought torture and cruel death to its enemies. To itself, it brought suspicion and a hardened heart. Turned inward, a prudent eye became delusional and a diligent hand became ruthless. Aridhol expelled all foreigners, fearing that they might be darkfriends. Those who did not leave found themselves in dungeons; those who did not die in the dungeons eventually swung from the trees. Within a few years, foreigners were not the only ones suspected of dealings with the Shadow. Aridhol became divided against itself, split into factions without empathy, mercy, or compromise. The streets were slick with the blood of its own citizens, shed by their brothers and mothers and friends.

“To the south, Manetheren looked at its neighbor with a heavy heart. Heavy for the loss suffered in Aridhol and heavy for the loss that would surely follow were that great nation unable to stand against the Dark One once Aramaelle fell— and indeed, that seemed only a matter of time, and not much time at that. Prince Caar al Thorin, son of Thorin al Toren al Ban, King of Manetheren, went to Aridhol to try to win it back to the Second Covenant. Instead he was imprisoned by one of the factions, suspected of serving a different camp. He was questioned and tortured and maimed, losing his left hand before he managed to escape.

“Manetheren was furious at this betrayal. It sent armies for vengeance, but they were turned back by an envoy from the White Tower. The Tower begged six weeks for Saraline Amerano of the Grey Ajah to broker a peace and reconciliation. Six weeks before Manetheren lay down its reprisal.

“Saraline had been raised in the breast of Aridhol, and still held a great fondness for it in her heart. Though her homeland had become a dangerous place to travel, she resolved to leave the White Tower even as Prince Caar was being stretched out on the rack. She told her sisters that she intended to end the troubles in Aridhol and unite the land once more. Her courage won her many admirers within the White Tower, but her sisters did not know all of her mind. Saraline kept secret her intention to resolve the bloody conflict in favor of one of the factions, the Blade of the Seven Stars.

“When Saraline arrived in Aridhol, she found the city worse than she had imagined. Balwen sat his throne, a withered shell with the light of madness in his eyes. She drew the Blade of the Seven Stars to her side, then set loose a weave of the One Power that changed the course of history.”

Moiraine Sedai paused and took a breath. Mat did the same, and looked about at the others. The firelight flickered across their faces, giving them a frightened and frightening look that suited Mat’s humor. Twilight was gone. Dark was upon them.

“Much of what follows is conjecture,” Moiraine Sedai continued, “gathered from the tales of those who fled in the time surrounding what we few who

remember call the Weave of the White Shadow. Saraline intended to unite Aridhol under her own hand using a mass Compulsion weave. This wicked manipulation of the One Power is forbidden today, but was not yet when Saraline breathed. Typically, Compulsion was used to bring one person's mind under the channeler's control. Saraline tried something different. She thought she knew a way to bring many under Compulsion at once, to capture the entire city. Some think she added more Spirit to the weave; others, a little Air and Fire. If anyone had tried such a thing since the Breaking of the World, it is forgotten now. Certainly its like has not been tried since.

“Whatever Saraline tried, it went wrong. Terribly wrong. Her weave fed the shadow that had fallen on Aridhol's heart, and the shadow fed her weave, until the two things became one and the same. Men raped and butchered their sisters and daughters. Women roasted their children and ate them. The fear bred violence and the violence bred fear. The weave escaped Saraline's control. It became, in a small sense, alive, given spark by the One Power and the fear and hatred of countless thousands.

“Day after day passed with no word, until finally the six weeks of grace were exhausted. Manetheren's armies marched on Aridhol seeking justice for their Prince. Instead they found the city gates torn down and no living creature inside the walls. Only one thing still called Aridhol home. The mindless child born of Saraline's poisonous weave had taken form and occupied all the city. It claimed as victims most of the soldiers who entered the city; those in the rearguard said they could hear the screams like a thousand lunatic crows being strangled. Those who escaped untouched named the thing Mashadar. It was bound to this city, to the very bedrock beneath us. And here it waits, hungering still. The story spread, and men spoke of Aridhol no more. They renamed this city Shadar Logoth, the Place Where the Shadow Waits, or more simply, Shadow's Waiting.

“Later in the Wars, after the fall of Aramaelle, an army camped within these ruins— trollocs, darkfriends, myrddraal, dreadlords, thousands in all. When they did not come out, scouts were sent inside the walls. The scouts found weapons, bits of armor, and blood splattered everywhere. And messages

scratched on walls in the trolloc tongue, calling on the Dark One to aid them in their last hour. Men who came later found no trace of the blood or the messages. They had been scoured away. No matter; halfmen and trollocs remember still. That is what keeps them outside this place.

“Shadar Logoth,” the Aes Sedai said. She turned to Perrin. “You asked what this place is. It is Shadar Logoth.”

“Then— then why hide here?” Rand asked. “We’d be safer out there trying to outrun them.”

Just then Lan came through the main door, leaping off his stallion as he came to a stop.

“I told you I mean to keep you safe, and I do.” Moiraine Sedai hardly paused to notice Lan’s arrival. “Mashadar cannot pass the wards I set around this building. A halfman would not even know these wards were there; they are tailored to a different kind of evil. But what calls Shadar Logoth home, that thing will not cross them, nor even come too near. In the morning it will be safe for us to go. Mashadar cannot stand the light of the sun. It will stay hidden, deep in the earth. Even in evening it will stay in the shadows of the city, waiting for full dark to venture forth.”

Mat thought of the hidden eyes that had watched from the shadows as he rode back to camp with Lan.

“Morning is too far off, Moiraine Sedai,” Lan said. “We shall have to leave now.”

“You found more trollocs.” Moiraine Sedai smoothly began folding the blankets she taken out for sleep. “How many? Do they know we are here?” Her tone and demeanor betrayed no anxiety at all.

“I do not think so. They number well over a hundred, likely a whole fist. They are frightened enough to kill anything that moves, including one another. The halfmen are having to drive them— four to handle just one fist — and even they seem to want nothing more than to pass through the city

and out as quickly as possible. They are not going much out of their way to search. They're so slipshod that I would say not to worry about them, but one of the four columns is heading nearly straight for us. They will arrive within the hour."

Moiraine Sedai stood. "Very well. Children, Master Gleeman, we must depart. Gather your things. Take nothing from this place. Pack quickly and quietly. We leave now."

Nynaeve eyed her narrowly. "Leave the protection of the wards, and cross Shadar Logoth in the night."

"Or stay here and face the trollocs," Moiraine Sedai said. "To hold them off here would require the One Power. It would destroy the wards and attract the very thing from which they are meant to protect us. Besides, it would be as good as building a signal fire atop one of those towers for every halfman within twenty miles. I have no more desire to leave than do you, Wisdom. But we are the hare, and it is the hounds who dictate the chase."

"What if there are more outside the walls?" Mat asked. "What are we gonna do?"

"We will use my original plan," the Aes Sedai said. Lan gave her a short nod. "I was too tired to carry this out before, but the Wisdom has me feeling well rested now. We make for the river. There, with our backs guarded by the water, I can raise a smaller ward that will hold the trollocs and halfmen back until we can make rafts and cross over. Or better yet, we may even be able to hail a trader's boat coming down from Saldaea."

Mat didn't understand that. How could water guard their backs? He looked at the others and knew that they didn't understand, either. Lan looked them over and sighed quietly.

"Trollocs and halfmen loathe deep water. Trollocs are terrified of it. Neither can swim. A halfman will not wade anything more than waist deep, especially if it moves. Trollocs won't do even that much if they can find any way to avoid it."

“So once we get across the river we’re safe,” Rand said, and the warder nodded.

“The myrddraal will find it almost as hard to make the trollocs build rafts as it was to drive them into Shadar Logoth. If they try to cross the Arinelle that way, half their fighters will run away and the rest will probably drown.”

“Get to your horses,” Moiraine Sedai said. “We are not across the river yet.”

As soon as they stepped outside, the wind filled Mat’s ears. It came in icy gusts, moaning across the rooftops, whipping their cloaks like banners, driving thin clouds across star-filled sky.

“Stay close,” the warder said. He kept his voice so low as to be a loud whisper, and the wind nearly swallowed it completely. Then he set off, and the rest followed.

Rand and Perrin were to either side of him, near enough to touch; Mat thought it kept a bit of the cold out. Egwene and the Wisdom rode behind him, and the gleeman just ahead.

The ruins around them made for strange shadows, looming in the night like malformed stone giants. More than once Mat mistook the howling wind for the heavy breath of a trolloc, or the clatter of rubble in the wind for footsteps. He spun his head from left to right and back again, trying to see everything at once. Something was wrong, but Mat could not say what. He kept looking, trying to figure it out. Left. Right. Left again.

The eyes are gone. Where have the eyes gone?

“Come now,” Thom said over his shoulder. “We’re falling behind.”

Mat pulled his eyes out of the shadows and scanned their party. Rand and Perrin were still at his sides, but the gleeman was a good ten paces ahead of them, and the Aes Sedai and warder another fifteen or twenty beyond him. Mat squeezed his legs a little and Cloud started closing the gap. He was

looking back at the girls, who remained close behind, when he heard “Stop!”

It was a strangled shout from Moiraine Sedai, sharp and urgent, but pitched not to carry far. A thin tendril of silver fog was drifting just ahead of Thom, who had done just what the Assegai said. By the time Mat had closed the short distance between himself and the gleeman, the fog was as thick as a man’s leg and stretched across the entire street. Mat could see it slowly fattening as if more were oozing out of the buildings on either side of them. Cloud whickered and tried to back farther away from the fog. The others’ horses tossed their heads and bridled against coming too near the fog.

Lan and Moiraine Sedai rode slowly back toward them, stopping well short of the fog. The Aes Sedai studied it closely. The branch of mist gave off a faint light that grew as the tentacle became fatter, but never got much brighter than a small candle.

“What is it?” Nynaeve asked.

“That is the evil of Shadar Logoth,” Moiraine Sedai said. “That is Mashadar. Unseeing, unthinking. If it touches you, you will die.” Mat felt his chest tighten. The Aes Sedai and warder were his best chance of staying safe. If they were separated...

“Then how do we join you?” Egwene asked. “Can you kill it? Can— can you clear a way?”

“Mashadar is vast, girl, as vast as Shadar Logoth itself. It has been here generation after generation. I doubt the whole White Tower could kill it. Were I to draw enough of the Power to clear a way for you six, it would pull the halfmen to us like a trumpet call. And Mashadar would rush in to heal whatever harm I did, rush in and perhaps catch us in its net.”

Mat looked at Egwene and then asked, “So... how do we join you, then?”

Moiraine Sedai let out a long breath. “There is nothing for it. This thing will not be above ground everywhere. Other streets will be clear. See that star?”

She twisted in her saddle to point to a red star low in the eastern sky. “Keep on toward that star, and it will bring you to the river. The river is our best friend. Whatever happens, keep moving toward it. Go as quickly as you can, but above all make no noise. There are still the trollocs, remember. And four halfmen.”

“But how will we find you again?” Perrin asked.

“I will find you,” she said. “Be assured, I can find you. Now be off. This thing is mindless, but it can sense food.” Indeed, ropes of silver had lifted from the larger body, drifting, wavering, like the tentacles of a hundred arms at the bottom of a Waterwood pond.

When Mat looked up from the thick trunk of opaque mist, she and the warder were gone. He licked his lips and looked at his friends. They looked nervous. So did he, he was sure. Night and ruins surrounded them. The fades were out there, somewhere, and the trollocs, maybe around the next corner. The fingers of fog drifted nearer; they were halfway to them now, and moved as if with a purpose.

“Hyah!” Thom spun his mount about and broke into a half trot. The Emond’s Fielders followed his lead and had pulled even with him within a few steps. Mat looked up at the red star. *The river*. He pulled his cloak tighter and felt something tucked in its folds— the dagger. *The dagger*. That could be handy; his quarterstaff was lashed up with the rest of his things and might be difficult to grab quickly. *Trollocs, and four halfmen*. He breathed in, then out. In. Out. *The river is our best friend*.

Before long the Wisdom had joined the gleeman at the head of the party. Three times they had to backtrack from a street blocked from side to side by a hill of stone and brick the horses could never have crossed. Mat heard the others breathing, short and sharp, just shy of panic. He gritted his teeth to stop his own panting.

He stopped breathing altogether when they rounded the next corner. A wall of fog bathed the broken pavement with a light as bright as a full moon. Streamers as thick as their horses broke off toward them. Nobody waited.

Wheeling, they galloped away in a tight knot, heedless of the clatter they raised.

Two trollocs stepped from an alleyway into the street in front of them, not ten spans away. Thom and Nynaeve pulled up short, but Mat leaned forward and sped toward them as he had seen Lan do. He let out a whoop as he trampled one of the trollocs, but fell silent as he turned back to face the other. A second pair of trollocs had spilled out of the alleyway, and another after that. Two by two the trollocs kept coming, colliding with those in front, building a wall between Mat and his friends. For an instant they remained frozen, staring vacantly at the humans. Then the night erupted in hissing, throaty howls that echoed off the buildings. The trollocs sprang forward. Most chased after the five behind him, but not a few headed straight for Mat. He had time to see the others scatter like quail before spinning back around and urging Cloud to his fastest gallop.

He caught Thom yelling directions to the others, but soon the gleeman's voice faded behind him and all Mat could hear was the wind howling in his ears, Cloud's hooves pounding on the street, and the frenzied barks and cries of the trollocs chasing him through Shadar Logoth.

Fleeing Mashadar

The street was narrowing. Broken-topped buildings leaned drunkenly, reaching for one another, for touch and comfort, for an escape from the loneliness of this forgotten city. So it seemed, anyway. The lean became more menacing when a silver glow began to fill the empty windows. Soon a dense mist was spilling out into the street. Perrin dropped low on the dun's neck and urged her on.

Ahead, half a dozen fingers of fog wavered from the windows, a dozen, feeling the air. Perrin hazarded a glance over his shoulder. The three trollocs still chased him, their catchpoles bobbing and bouncing as they ran. He didn't seem to have put any distance at all between them; they trailed by no more than fifty paces. *How can anything run so fast on two legs?*

Then he saw it. Behind the trollocs, a fade, riding hard on its galloping steed, its cowl pushed back to reveal that pale, eyeless face. The trollocs looked to be fleeing the halfman as much as chasing Perrin, but that thought offered little comfort.

When he returned his eyes to the road ahead, a dozen threads of Mashadar were reaching out from the windows to his left and right. A score. More. The mare screamed and tossed her head, but Perrin leaned even farther forward and dug his heels into her side. The dun lunged ahead wildly.

The tendrils stiffened as Perrin galloped between them, looking like fingers pointing in accusation. He crouched low and refused to look at them. The way beyond was clear. He just had to get another thirty paces without being touched. He booted the mare harder and she leapt forward into the welcome

shadows. The glow of the fog began to fade into the night, and Perrin looked back again.

Mashadar now blocked half the street. The trollocs were balking, but the fade snatched a whip from its saddlebow and cracked it over their heads. Sparks flew from its tip, and the sound was like thunder. Perrin blinked hard and shook his head; he was tired, and frightened, and unsure if he could trust his senses.

Whether the sparks were real or no, the trollocs did their best to avoid the whip, lurching forward, crouching even though the ribbons of fog were at least two paces above their heads. The halfman hesitated, then spurred forward after them.

Mashadar's tentacles swung uncertainly for a moment, then struck like vipers. At least two latched on to each trolloc, bathing them in grey light; when the beasts threw their heads back to scream, fog rolled over and into their open mouths, swallowing the sounds of their pain and terror. Four bands of fog whipped around the fade, each as thick as a horse's neck. The halfman and its mount tried to avoid them with a mad, arrhythmic dance. The halfman opened its mouth; the fog rushed in, just as it had with the trollocs. No sound escaped, but Perrin swore he caught a thin, piercing whine just beyond hearing, like all the hornets in the world digging into his ears and filling his head. The dun convulsed as if she could hear it, too, and ran harder than ever. Perrin hung on, panting, his throat as dry as sand.

After a time he realized that the fade's silent death shriek no longer filled his head. It was filled instead with the clatter of his galloping mount, which now seemed as loud as drums. He reined hard and looked up. The sky above was overcast, but the red star in the east was low and easy to mark. He clicked his tongue and nudged the dun into a relaxed walk, making toward the river. Without the glowing fog, the street was dark. Perrin stuck to the shadows, keeping his eyes and ears open, hoping that his friends saw the star, too.

Leaning forward, Rand tried to bury his face in his horse's mane, in part to urge the stallion on and in part to keep the faint but nauseous smell of Mashadar out of his nose. It was the odor of rotten fruit and rendered fat, sick and sticky sweet, fevered, wafting from the wisps of fog that drifted to either side and above him as they raced away from the trollocs.

“Hyah! Run, girl!” He turned back at the sound of Egwene's voice. She was riding Bela hard; even with her short, sturdy legs, the mare had fallen no more than two lengths behind Rand's chestnut stallion. Rand was still looking over his shoulder, trying to reassure her with his eyes, when the chestnut skidded to a stop and then reared, almost throwing Rand in the process. A trolloc with a long black halberd had appeared before them, apparently wandering out from an alley to the right. Luckily, it seemed just as surprised as Rand was. It took a step back from the rearing stallion before remembering its mission. It snarled and jabbed the halberd at him but came up more than two feet short.

Rand must have blocked the trolloc from Bela's view, because she didn't stop until she was a good six paces past it. The trolloc spun toward Bela and Egwene, who had turned about and now faced Rand with the trolloc between them. Rand let out a scream. He drew his sword and kicked his mount forward sharply, swinging the blade in a violent arc that the trolloc was just able to deflect as it turned back toward his wordless roar.

A blue flash where sword met halberd. Bela's nicker as she backed away from the flash and the clang of weapons. The ghost image left behind after the flash had faded from his eye. The hateful snarl on the trolloc's lip as it focused its attention on Rand. The look of shock and pain that took the place of the snarl just a heartbeat later.

The stallion stepped back; Rand saw Bela do the same. A rope of fog had extended from a window to Rand's right and buried itself in the trolloc's chest. Another was diving from a second-storey window to the left. In a moment, he would be cut off from Egwene. He looked back the way they

had come. The two trollocs who had been chasing them were now joined by three others, and they were closing fast.

“Rand!”

He turned to see Egwene trying to get Bela to move back in his direction. The mare was clearly reluctant. *Good.*

“Bela, run!” he shouted. “Go, go, go!”

Egwene’s eyes went wide. “No!”

The second arm of Mashadar reached the trolloc and plunged down its throat just as it began to let loose a cry. Bela took a few steps back. “Bela, go!” Rand shouted again. Bela was just turning about when Rand turned back to face the other trollocs.

“Rand!”

Before Egwene finished calling his name, her voice was lost behind the barks and the howls and the sour, metallic clash of battle.



With Clover fleeing the trollocs at a desperate gallop, Nynaeve feared falling nearly as much as slowing. She was not an expert rider, a fact she had never regretted until now. Her hands were wrapped so tightly in the reins that she could feel the frustrated pulse of the blood in her fingers, cut off from the heart it called home. More than once her teeth slammed shut, and the pounding of the saddle between her legs was uncomfortable and unnervingly familiar.

Up ahead, the narrow street she was on began to slope up and curve to the left. She would soon lose sight of what was before her and what was behind. She checked over her shoulder quickly; about twenty paces back, a

lone trolloc followed. She squeezed her eyes tight, took a deep breath, and turned back around.

When she opened her eyes, Nynaeve saw a wall of Mashadar rushing around the bend, filling up the entire street from left to right and bearing down on her. She jerked the reins left so hard she nearly fell out of the saddle, but she succeeded in getting the mare to duck into an alley just in time to avoid the oncoming fog. The alley went only about twenty feet before ending where it hit another small backstreet extending left and right. The corner was too tight to turn quickly, and as Clover slowed, Nynaeve was sure she'd feel Mashadar's touch any second. She looked back as the mare turned right, but the fog was not following. Even so, it blocked the way behind them. It had rushed past the alley and now acted like a wall where the alley met the street she had just turned from. A harsh, howling scream came from that direction, then disappeared almost before it began. *Swallowed in the mist. In Mashadar.* She faced front and urged the horse on, eager to get away while she could.

The back alleys of Shadar Logoth were a labyrinth. Before long, Nynaeve was lost and unsure if she would ever find her way out. She turned right or left at random. After a while she just let the horse lead the way. It seemed like an hour or more had passed when she finally found herself on a wide, open avenue. She saw no sign of Mashadar or trollocs— or Egwene and the boys, for that matter— and heard nothing but the wind.

She looked up. Moiraine's red star was easy enough to see, and almost straight ahead. As much as Nynaeve hated to take the Aes Sedai's lead, heading toward that star was her only hope of finding the children again. She clucked Clover into motion and was soon moving at an easy trot.

In no more than twenty minutes she was passing through a large arched gateway in the city wall and out into the forest. In that time she had seen no mist, no fog, no shadowspawn, and certainly none of her party. She paused on the other side of the gate. She could hear the roar of the River Arinelle ahead, muffled by the forest but still easy to make out. She walked a ways into the trees, then turned around. *No sign of anyone. No way to know if I'm*

the first or the last to make it out. Nynaeve decided to keep on to the river. Hopefully everyone would find it, and not be too far upstream or down to spot each other.

The river was farther than she had guessed, and bigger. She looked around when she got there, but saw no sign of the others. She stopped and dismounted at a small hollow she found not far from the water. She could see the bank from here, but the trees would hide her from unwelcome eyes. She was not like to find a better place to wait for the others. She sat down with her back against the trunk of a young oak and wrapped Cover's reins around her wrist. Dawn was still a ways off. Plenty of time for the others to make their way. No cause for worry yet. She leaned her head against the tree and stared at the river. Soon she would see the others. Soon.

Soon.



Dawn was still hours away when Mat realized he heard no sounds of pursuit, nothing save the clatter of Cloud's gallop. When a long look over his shoulder revealed nothing but dark shadows and the hollowness of the abandoned city, he reined the grey hard. He was beside a jagged wall, right where two streets met. A broken monument reared in the darkness before him.

Sitting high in his saddle, he listened closely, but heard only the blood pounding in his ears. Cold sweat beaded on his face, and he shivered as the wind flailed his cloak.

After a ten count of silence, Mat relaxed in his saddle. He could still see Moiraine Sedai's star, low to his left. *Are the others headed that way now? Are they even alive to see it? Do the trollocs hold them captive, trussed and bound?* He had no way to know. But if they were alive and free, they would be following that star. And if not...

The ruins were vast. He could search for days without finding anyone, anyone but hungry trollocs. And fades. And Mashadar. Reluctantly, he decided to make for the river. He gathered the reins, then heard something from the crossing street. The click of one stone falling against another.

Mat pulled his staff from his pack, then held as still as he could, not even breathing. He was still a pace short of the corner, hidden in the shadows. He fought an impulse to back away. He couldn't remember what was behind him, what might make a noise and betray his presence. To check, he would have had to take his eyes off of the corner of the building. *Couldn't if I wanted to. Which I bloody well don't.*

If the cross street had been paved with stones, they were naught but dust now. When footsteps came, they came against hard dirt, and Mat couldn't tell by sound what kind of feet he was hearing. Finally, a dark shape emerged from around the corner, led by a shaft nearly at Mat's eye level. *Catchpole.* Mat dug his heels into Cloud's ribs and brought his staff down hard against the catchpole, knocking it to the ground. On the follow-through, he came back to a ready position, then struck where he expected to find the trolloc's head. Instead he found al'Thor a horse, startled and empty handed, his da's sword lying harmless at his horse's feet. Only a desperate effort stopped the staff from hitting al'Thor's leg and likely breaking bones.

Mat drew a deep breath and lowered his weapon. "Al'Thor." His arms were shaking. "Heyo, there. Have— have you seen anybody else?"

Al'Thor swallowed hard before hopping down from his saddle to retrieve the sword. "I-I— just trollocs." He sheathed the blade and mounted again. "Just trollocs. You?"

Mat shook his head. "They must be trying to reach the river, right? We'd best do the same." Al'Thor nodded and started silently toward the red star.

Before they had covered a hundred spans they heard the keening cry of a trolloc horn from the depths of the city. Another answered, from outside the walls.

Mat looked at al' Thor. The Westwood boy didn't say anything, or even so much as raise an eyebrow. But Mat knew they were both thinking more or less the same thing. *Bollocks.*

They kept a slow pace, watching the darkest places and avoiding them when possible. They heard no more horns. No sounds at all, really. All was silent as they reached an opening in the vine-shrouded wall where a gate had once been. Only the towers remained, their broken tops making a jagged shape against the black sky.

Mat hesitated at the gateway.

“Is it any safer in here than out there?” al' Thor asked, his soft voice filling up the dead silence. Mat said nothing in return, but kicked his horse through to the other side. Al' Thor followed close behind.

As they crossed out of the city, Mat tried to look in every direction at once. As far as he could see, the forest was empty. He let out a slow breath; his mouth was dry. *We're going to make it.* The wall vanished behind them, swallowed by the night and the forest. *We're going to make it.* He kept the red star dead ahead, looking for the slightest movement, listening for the slightest sound. *We're going to make it.*

They were fifty paces outside the city when Mat heard hoofbeats. A quick glance over his shoulder revealed nothing. The forest was far from dense here, but there were trees enough to hide all of the broken city save the top of the wall and the towers. Mat couldn't see anything moving, but still the hoofbeats got louder. Clearer. Then Thom Merrill hurtled through a gap in the trees just to their left, his patched cloak fluttering in the night. From beyond him came the snarling cries of frustrated beasts, hunters denied their quarry.

The gleeman was almost on them when he shouted, “Ride, fools! Ride!”

Out of the darkness came the trollocs, one, then another, then another. They waved heavy black blades and long catchpoles in the air.

We're not going to make it. Mat whipped his head around and dug in his heels. *We're not going to make it.*

Egwene saw no trollocs or fades standing guard, but that didn't mean they weren't lying in wait, ready to ambush anyone who walked through the large plaza. Crossing the plaza, of course, was the only way to get to the gateway, and the forest on the other side. She would have to ride almost a hundred paces with nothing but the night to shield her from searching eyes. She stopped for a moment to look closely, to think slowly, but quickly realized that she had all the information she was going to get. She either had to go through or move on.

She rode out of the deeper shadow into the lesser darkness. As she did, another horse appeared from a street to her right and stopped. Egwene brought Bela to a halt. The other rider's face was hidden, but she could see his or her cloak rustling in the wind. *Not a fade.* She exhaled.

"Rand?" she called. "Nynaeve?" She kept her voice quiet, but it still sounded far too loud in the empty dark.

The rider let out a short bark of a laugh. "It's Perrin, Egwene," he called back, just as softly.

The horses came together near the fountain.

"Seen anyone else?" they both asked at the same time. Egwene shook her head; so did Perrin.

"They'll be alright," Egwene said, patting Bela's neck. "Won't they?"

"Aye, Moiraine Sedai and Lan will look after them well enough," said Perrin. "They'll look after all of us. We just need to get to the river."

“Right. Let’s go already. I’ve had my fill of this city— my fill and more.”

Walking through the gate felt like having a heavy chain lifted from around her neck. Even the prospect of trollocs hiding in the trees was not enough to dampen Egwene’s relief. Above, the red star was still visible through the leafless treetops to their left. *Soon, the river and Moiraine Sedai.* The wind carried a nighthawk’s lonely cry through the naked branches, rustling the leaves and needles on the forest’s few evergreens. Egwene and Perrin moved their horses closer.

A trolloc horn sounded somewhere behind them— quick, wailing blasts. Then thick, half-human howls rose on their trail, seeming to get louder and more inflamed by the second. *They’ve caught our scent.*

“Let’s go!” she shouted to Perrin, kicking Bela to a gallop. “Hyah! Hyah!” He was of the same mind, and they were soon speeding together through the trees, heedless of noise, heedless of the branches that slapped at them.

Before long, Bela fell behind. Egwene kicked the mare and flailed her with the reins, but it was doing no good. She could hear the trollocs getting closer. Perrin looked back at her and drew in enough not to leave her behind. He tried to give her a smile, but it was forced; if anything, it made her worry more.

“Hyah!” she shouted, then looked behind her. She could make out the trollocs now, dark shapes slicing through the trees. Their snarling howls sent chills down her back and arms. *Come on, girl.* “Hyah!”

She looked ahead again just in time to see Perrin’s horse disappear downward, as if diving from a cliff. The horse screamed, then she heard a splash. She reined hard, but Bela didn’t have room to stop. The mare dropped away beneath her and Egwene tumbled out of the saddle. She flung out her hands to brace herself and went headfirst into the icy water of the River Arinelle.

The shock of freezing water ripped a gasp from her, and she swallowed more than a little before managing to fight her way to the surface. She

gulped down air as she tried to tread water— no easy task with her cloak and coat already sodden and her riding boots filled with water. She looked around for Perrin, but saw naught but the starlight glinting off the black water, and the outline of angry branches stretching toward the sky.

“Perrin? Perrin!”

A spear flashed right in front of her, throwing water in her face. She heard others splash around her. *Bollocks. They hear me.* Egwene took a deep breath and ducked her head below the water for as long as she could. She twisted and turned as she struggled out of her heavy cloak, sacrificing it to the depths of the river. She felt more than heard two or three more splashes, but none after that. When she surfaced, guttural voices were arguing somewhere on the bank, getting softer as she drifted downriver.

Feeling lighter without her cloak, Egwene set out for the far bank. Even without her cloak, it was difficult to keep her head above water. Her coat and boots each seemed to weigh as much as she did. She tried to keep her kicks and strokes strong and even, but it was hard going.

After a while her arms and legs became leaden, and she lifted her head out of the water with every third stroke instead of each one. She coughed from water that went up her nose. She was almost ready to despair of ever reaching the far bank when her foot struck something. Then her other foot did the same. She was in the shallows. She was across the river.

Gasping, she got to her feet, splashing about as her legs almost gave way. She looked around wildly, shivering, but saw no one, friend or foe. Just a few scattered trees along the bank, and the stars reflecting off the river’s surface.

When she had her breath again, she called out for Perrin and the others through chattering teeth. The harsh voices of trollocs answered faintly from the other bank, but of her friends she heard nothing. The wind gusted; it was not cold enough to freeze her wet clothes, but it felt so; it felt cold enough to freeze the marrow in her bones. She hugged herself and rubbed her arms, but it seemed to do little good. Once more, Egwene called out for

her friends. Once more, she got no answer. She would have to look for them tomorrow; tonight she would spend alone.

Still shivering, she climbed up the riverbank to find shelter against the wind.

Mat dared not reach for his staff. Fighting was difficult on a moving horse, and the effort might slow him down, get him caught. As it was, the trollocs were almost close enough to touch the tails of their horses. Lose half a step and those catchpoles would drag him right out of his saddle. No, best just lean forward, whisper some encouragement to the grey, and hope their luck had not run out.

To Mat's right was al' Thor, riding as hard as he could. The gleeman had been to his left, but now seemed to have disappeared. *Didn't see or hear the old man fall. Doubt he'd end up in a trolloc's sack, anyhow. Too clever by half, that one. So where—*

The sound of new hoofbeats and the crackle of broken branches turned Mat's head around. Thom's gelding was galloping hard *behind* the trollocs. *How did he get there?* The trollocs had only time enough to look back in surprise before the gleeman's hands whipped back and then forward. Steel flashed bright and two of the trollocs fell. One tumbled forward, rolling over and over before landing in a heap, while the other dropped to its knees with a scream, clawing at its back with both hands. The last trolloc snarled, baring a mouthful of jagged teeth, and sprang sideways, trying to escape its companions' fate. Thom threw a third time and the thing let loose a shrill and sour cry that faded into the distance as they kept on toward the river.

When the shrieks had died out, Mat and al' Thor pulled up and stared at the gleeman.

“Really liked those knives,” he muttered, but he made no effort to turn around and retrieve them. “Come. Those screams will bring more. I hope the river isn’t too far. I hope— ” He cut himself short with a shake of his head and set off at a quick canter. Mat and al’ Thor fell in behind him.

Soon they reached a low bank where trees grew right to the edge of the black, rippling water. The far side of the river was not visible in the dark. *Cross this by raft? At night?* Seeing the Arinelle up close, Moiraine Sedai’s plan suddenly seemed dodgy. Still, it was more appealing than staying put.

Somewhere to the west, a trolloc horn brayed, sharp and quick. It was the first horn they’d heard since leaving the ruins. *Does that mean someone has been captured? Or maybe that someone has escaped?*

“We cannot stay here all night,” Thom said. “Pick a direction. Upriver, or down?”

“Moiraine Sedai and the others could be anywhere,” al’ Thor said. “Whichever way we choose could just take us further away.”

“So it could.” Clucking to his gelding, Thom turned downriver, heading along the bank. “So it could.”

Nothing much changed as they walked downstream. The bank was higher in some places, lower in others; the trees grew thicker, or thinned out in small clearings; but the night and the river and the wind were all the same, cold and black.

Then they saw a light ahead, a single point that looked to be well above the river, as if in a tree. They quickened their pace, and as they drew close saw that the light came from lantern atop one of the masts of a large trader’s boat. A good eighty feet long, the boat was tied up beside a small clearing in the trees, rocking gently with the current. With the lantern, the deck was twice as well-lit as the clearing, but Mat still didn’t see anyone aboard.

“Better than an Aes Sedai’s raft,” Thom said as he dismounted. He looked over the vessel and nodded. “She’s not made to carry horses, but

considering that we bring warning of a great danger that he would not otherwise know about until far too late, the captain may yet be reasonable. Just let me do all the talking. And bring your blankets and saddlebags, just in case.”

Mat climbed down and began untying the things behind his saddle. “You don’t mean to leave without the others, do you?”

Before Thom could answer, two trollocs burst into the clearing. When they saw Mat and the others, the trollocs howled and waved their catchpoles, and four more came crashing in behind them. The horses reared and whinnied. Shouts in the distance said more trollocs were on the way.

“Onto the boat!” Thom shouted. “Quick! Leave all that!” With that he ran, patches flapping and instrument cases on his back banging together. “You on the boat!” he shouted. “Wake up, you fools! Trollocs!”

Mat grabbed one saddlebag, his blanketroll, and his quarterstaff, then sprinted till he was on Thom’s heels. The gleeman, always more spry than he seemed, jumped smoothly up to the rail, planted a foot on the top bar, and launched himself onto the deck. Mat tossed his things over the rail, then vaulted himself up and over. As he landed, he heard a soft thump and a grunt to his right. Al’ Thor had come down on a sleeping man, feet right to the belly, and then tumbled to the deck. Almost simultaneously, two catchpoles slammed into the railing right where he and al’ Thor had come over.

A pale hand grabbed the railing. Mat swung his staff round and caught the trolloc flush just as its head rose into sight. The thing’s cheek caved in with a wet crunch, and Mat saw a stream of blood erupt out of its face before it let go of the railing and fell into the River Arinelle.

He turned to check on al’ Thor, whose sword was at that moment drawing a strangled scream and no small amount of blood from a second trolloc. Mat glanced around quickly but had once more lost track of Thom. No surprise, now that the entire boat was awake and scurrying.

Men ran everywhere, shouting, pointing, hacking mooring lines with axes. The boat lurched and swung. *It's as eager to be off as we are.* Up in the bow three men struggled with a trolloc. Someone thrust over the side with a spear, though Mat could not see what he was stabbing at. Al' Thor stood and stumbled toward Mat, looking around wildly and holding his left shoulder. The boat lurched again and then was out in the current, moving swiftly down the Arinelle. Al' Thor fell forward the last few paces, dropping his sword and crashing into Mat. The two of them ended up on the deck, backs against the mainmast.

When Mat looked up, a stocky man in a coat that hung to his knees stood over them with a pair of long daggers and a tough to either side. His long hair fell to his thick shoulders, and a beard that left his upper lip bare framed a round face. Round but not soft.

“Well, well,” the man said. “Fuck me sideways and call me Cassie. There do be stowaways on my boat. Tell me, who be you, and where be you going out here in the middle of nowhere, and why should I no give you both second smiles and throw you over the side for whatever this trouble be as you did bring to my feet?”

Book Three: Many Paths

North of the Arinelle

Egwene was drifting.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Drift.

She cleared her mind of everything but a pool of water, fed by a waterfall, just as Moiraine Sedai had been teaching her. The waterfall was wide and tall, but it made no splash in the pool. It made no sound. Egwene could see it in her mind. She smelled the freshwater. She knew the stillness. She *was* the stillness. She was the pool, undisturbed by the cascade of water pouring into her. Still. Silent. There was no one or nothing else. Still.

And then there was.

Light. Light spreading from the bottom of the waterfall to every inch of the pool. Spreading up the waterfall. Reaching out in every direction. The water *became* light. Egwene became light. A warmth filled her and she opened her eyes. *There.*

The wood, arranged before her in a cone above a bed of bare earth, caught fire. Egwene laughed and lost her concentration. The warm sweetness of the Power was gone. She felt its absence, but the fire was lit and she kept her smile.

She sat in the heart of a dense stand of trees. A thick wall of leatherleaf and cedar surrounded her, protecting her from prying eyes and the biting wind. In the center, a lone hemlock created a small clearing at its base. Egwene held her hands up to the flames and sighed as the warmth returned to them.

She considered hanging her wet clothes out to dry, but decided it was too cold to go naked, even with a fire and no wind.

Egwene had nothing but her clothes. Her bedroll and saddlebags were with Bela, wherever she had ended up. Egwene wondered how the others had fared. Perrin made it across, of that she was sure. But what of Rand, and Mat? What of Moiraine Sedai, and the warder? Had Nynaeve found safety?

Fool girl. Nothing will come of twisting your hands in knots when you can do nothing for them. Plans will be better made by the morning light, but not if you're too tired to walk or see or think.

She wrapped her arms around her knees and stared into the fire. The random pops and snaps began to sound like music, and she hummed an old nursery song as she rested her forehead against her knees.

Egwene's head shot up at the sound of rustling leaves. *Dozed off. Who's here?* She reached down and grabbed the thickest branch she saw. Holding it above her head, she crouched low. The sound stopped, then started again. Then she heard a soft, familiar whicker.

“Bela?!”

Egwene reached into the tangle of branches and spread them wide. The stout little mare shuffled into the clearing, still wearing her saddlebags and bedroll. Egwene laughed and threw her arms around Bela. She hadn't realized how alone she felt until she wasn't. She was near to tears as she laughed and squeezed the horse's neck.

Egwene unsaddled Bela, and while the mare cozied up to the fire, Egwene took inventory. The clothes at the bottom of the saddlebags were pretty well soaked, but those at the top were mostly dry. She changed out of what she was wearing and hung it up to dry, along with the wet clothes from the saddlebags. Buried in her clothes she found an oiled paper packet filled with hard bread and cheese. She laughed again when she opened it and found that the food was still dry. She took out a little and nibbled in front of the fire. Her bedroll was wet through, so she hung it on a branch and cleared a

patch of earth close to the fire to sleep on. She fed some more branches to the flames and curled up.

The fire had burned low when Bela woke Egwene with a nicker. She sat up and listened. The morning light poked timidly through the hemlock canopy. She heard branches rustling like the night before, but this sounded much more deliberate than Bela trying to feel her way toward the fire. Just as Egwene got to her feet, someone came crashing into the clearing. With little firelight, she could not tell who it was, though she guessed it a man from his size.

“Egwene!”

“P-Perrin?”

The blacksmith’s apprentice folded his big arms around her and lifted her off the ground.

“Perrin!” she said, laughing as he finally put her down. “I knew you’d made it.”

“Aye, and that I did. When I saw Bela’s footprint with Master Luhhan’s double-crossbar horseshoes, I knew you had, too.”

“Boy, you’re still wet. Did you just crawl out of the river this minute? Here, sit by the fire and warm yourself. You lost your horse, didn’t you?”

She pushed him to a place by the fire, where he sat and rubbed his hands over the flames. She offered him some of the bread and cheese, which he took gladly enough.

“I lost Bela, too. She found me on this side, though, give thanks. But I— I haven’t seen anybody else.”

She took the packet back and rewrapped it. Perrin licked the crumbs from his fingers before speaking. “I ain’t seen nobody but you. None of ours, and not a fade nor a trolloc, neither. At least there’s that.”

“Rand has to be alright,” Egwene said. “I mean, they all do. They have to. Right? I mean, they’re probably looking for us right now. They might find us anytime now. Moiraine Sedai will know how.”

“Aye. Aes Sedai.” His brow was furrowed and the corners of his mouth turned down.

“See here, you didn’t complain when she saved us all from the trollocs,” she said.

“I just wish we could do without her.” She kept looking at him, waiting for him to speak sense. Eventually he shrugged and went on. “I suppose we can’t, though. I’ve been thinking. We could wait for her and Lan to find us. Just stay put.”

“Of course,” Egwene said. “Moiraine Sedai said she would find us if we were separated.”

But Perrin wasn’t finished. “But then, mayhap the trollocs find us first. Moiraine Sedai, she might be dead, too. All of them could be. I’m sorry, but they could be. I hope they are all safe. I hope to see them walk up to this fire any minute. But my da says hope is like a piece of string when you’re drowning; it just ain’t enough to get you out by itself.”

Egwene closed her mouth and stared at him. Finally, she said, “You want to go downriver to Whitebridge? If Moiraine Sedai doesn’t find us here, that’s where she will look next.”

“I suppose,” he said slowly, “that’s where we *should* go, by rights. But them halfmen must know that, too. That’s where they’ll be looking, and if they find us, ain’t no Aes Sedai or warder there to protect us this time.”

“What then? Should we run off somewhere, the way Mat wanted to? Illian, was it? Even if we get to a place where the fades and trollocs won’t find us, Moiraine Sedai probably won’t find us there, either.”

“Don’t think that ain’t tempting,” he said quietly. “But every time we think we’re free, fades and trollocs find us again. I don’t know if there *is* anyplace we could hide from them. I don’t much like it— it ain’t a comfortable thought— but we need Moiraine Sedai.”

Egwene was puzzled now. “I don’t understand then. Where do we go?”

“I was thinking,” he said, grabbing a stick and scratching an X in the dirt. “If this is where we are now, and that is Whitebridge”— another X— “then Caemlyn should be somewhere around here.” He made a third mark, off to the side.

He didn’t say anything for a while. Egwene tried to remember Papa’s old map. *The old map even Papa said wasn’t too accurate.* She sighed. Perrin’s marks could be right, or near enough.

“Caemlyn?”

“Caemlyn.” He drew a line in the dirt between two of the dots. “Away from the river and straight across. Nobody would expect that. We wait for them in Caemlyn.” He dusted his hands and looked at her. She just stared at the marks, and the line he had drawn. *It’s a good plan.*

She nodded. “There must be villages. We can ask the way.”

Perrin smiled and let out a big breath. “Yes,” he said. “But what worries me is what to do if the Aes Sedai *don’t* find us there.” He chuckled softly. “Never did I think to say such words, or worry about such a thing. But maybe she don’t go to Caemlyn. Maybe she thinks we’re dead, or takes Rand and Mat straight to Tar Valon. She might conjure two out of three ain’t bad, after all.”

“She said she could find us,” Egwene said. “If she can find us here, she can find us in Caemlyn. Are you going to doubt her?”

“Fair enough, then,” he said with a nod. “But if we see three sunrises in Caemlyn afore we see the others, I say we go on to Tar Valon and put our

case afore the Amyrlin Seat. Lan said as there's a good road between the two, Caemlyn and Tar Valon." He licked his lips and cleared his throat. "Say, what chance of a little more bread and cheese?"

"Tsk. This might have to last us a long time," she said. "And *seven* days in Caemlyn. Who knows how long it will take her to find the Wisdom and the other boys? And how far is it from Whitebridge to Caemlyn? We don't know."

"Seven days then."

Egwene smiled. She was going to see Caemlyn! But first they had to get there.

From the first day, they fell into a rhythm and routine as they made for Caemlyn. Perrin played stoic at the start, offering to walk the whole way, but Egwene was having none of it. They could go only as fast as whoever was on foot, and Perrin's pace would surely start to lag if he didn't get periodic rest. Besides, she wasn't going to be the only one to get saddle-sore.

By the end of the first day, they had exhausted what little of Egwene's bread and cheese remained. When they stopped to make camp, Perrin went looking for likely rabbit runs to set snares along while Egwene laid a fire. She collected some bark and dry grass for tinder, twigs and broken branches for kindling, and a couple of larger branches to fuel the fire proper.

She found a good patch of bare earth to serve as a fire bed. After building a cone of kindling around the tinder, she closed her eyes and cleared her mind. Nothing but the pool and the waterfall. She reached out for the Power but she kept coming up empty. The more she tried, the more frustrated she got, and touching the True Source seemed to go from difficult to impossible.

"What are you doing?" Perrin asked, breaking her concentration. Egwene opened her eyes and looked up. He had returned with a rabbit— scrawny, but still more than she had expected. "You can't wish a fire."

“You got one,” she said with a smile.

“I was lucky,” he said. “Get your flint and steel. We eat well tonight, at least.”

“I don’t have a flint. I lost it in the river.”

“Then how—?”

“It was so easy back there on the riverbank,” she said. She could hear the irritation in her voice. “It was just the way Moiraine Sedai showed me. I just reached out, and...” She reached with her hand, as if that would help, then let it fall with a sigh. “I can’t find it now.”

“Th-the Power?” He licked his lips uneasily. “Are you sure you should be—I mean, you can’t just play around with that. And Moiraine Sedai ain’t here if—”

“It was so *easy*, Perrin. I can do it. I know I can.”

Perrin took a deep breath. “I’ll make a firebow, Egwene. Don’t— don’t try that again.”

“And just what gives you the notion that you get to tell me what to do, Perrin Aybara?” she asked with a grin. “I wouldn’t think to tell you to give up that ridiculous axe of yours. And at least I’ve shown some talent in channeling.”

Perrin sighed. He had never been much of a joker, and banter was not his strong suit. *He could stand a bit of silly in him, that one.*

“I’ll make a firebow,” he said. “And just— don’t try it again tonight. Please?”

She was tempted to put up a fight, but she knew that she had little chance of channeling that night anyway. She just wasn’t having any luck. In the end, the rabbit tasted just as good roasted over Perrin’s fire as it would have over

Egwene's. And she found herself grateful for Perrin's firebow when she couldn't make anything more than a trickle of smoke, however hard she tried every night.

After that one hot meal, they made do with coarse wild tubers and a few young shoots— none of it plentiful, and none of it tasty, either. Perrin didn't complain. Neither did Egwene, though she was tempted to. Instead she picked at her meager meals, sighing and thinking of a bit of cheese, or the smell of fresh bread. One afternoon, Perrin found mushrooms— Queen's Crowns, the best— in a shady part of the forest. They gobbled them down one after the other, laughing and telling stories from back home. But the mushrooms did not last long, and neither did the laughter. Hunger was a mean and miserable thing.

They set snares every night, but found them empty every morning. Whoever was walking carried a sling, ready to hurl, but they never spied a rabbit or squirrel. Neither of them knew how far it was to Caemlyn, and neither would feel safe until they got there, if then.

That didn't look likely to happen anytime soon. Two days from the river the land changed to thickly forested hills. A day after that the hills flattened out again into a dense forest broken up by wide glades, often a mile or more across. The tail end of winter had all of it in its grip, snow still lying in hidden hollows and a bitter and biting wind always swirling around their heads. Nowhere did they see a road, or a plowed field, or chimney smoke in the distance, or any other sign of human habitation. At least, none where anyone still lived.

They saw the remains of tall stone ramparts around one hilltop. Parts of roofless stone houses stood inside the fallen circle. But the forest had reclaimed that place a long time ago. Trees grew right through everything, and old creeper vines wrapped themselves around the big stone blocks. Another time they came on a stone tower. Its top was broken down and worn with the wind, and it leaned unsteadily against the huge oak whose thick roots were slowly toppling it.

That was as close as they came to finding someone to ask directions, or who might be willing to share some food. Their days became quieter, and Egwene's temper grew shorter. Once or twice she snapped at Perrin when he had done nothing to earn it. He never responded in kind, of course, which just made her feel lower yet.

It didn't help that she wasn't sleeping well. Every night, she lay awake counting the stars and making up stories about them, or trying in vain to touch the True Source, or remembering Papa's laugh and Mama's food and wishing she were home. No matter what she did, she couldn't fall asleep. Perrin had no such problem. He was out almost from the moment he lay down. But his nights looked no more restful than hers, turning to and fro and muttering and shivering at his dreams. Which made sense, since when she did sleep, Egwene dreamt of Shadar Logoth more often than not.

It was well past noon one day when, with Egwene sitting ahorse, Perrin stopped and pulled them up short. Bela flared her nostrils and swung her head to the south. Egwene pulled quickly but lightly on the reins, not wanting the mare to make a sound, but she could hardly contain her own excitement. She smelled it, too.

"That's smoke," she said. She leaned forward in the saddle, drew a deep breath. "A cookfire. Somebody is roasting dinner. Rabbit."

"Maybe," Perrin said. He tucked his sling away and drew out his half-moon axe. Egwene's smile faded. She thought about who or what else might have a cookfire, what other meat she might be smelling. She pulled out her own sling, though she was a poor shot from horseback, and nodded at Perrin. *I hope you've learned something about using that thing, Perrin Aybara.*

"Wait here," he said softly, and started toward the smoke.

She frowned and hopped out of the saddle. "I'll not let you go up there alone. As tiresome as you may be sometimes, you're my only company right now and I don't fancy losing you to a stranger in the wilderness." He opened his mouth but she cut him off with a flick of her wrist. "I'll stay a bit

back with Bela, but close enough that we can both jump on quickly if we have to flee. And I don't want to hear about it."

Perrin paused a second and then nodded. She drew a deep breath and they started toward the smoke.

They crept as quietly as they could, following the smell of the cookfire. Before long they came to a tall oak with spreading, serpentine limbs that bent to touch the ground, then rose again. The fire was on the other side. Perrin held a finger to his lips and started to sneak around the tree to the right. Egwene backed Bela off a bit, hoping to get an angle to see whose fire it was. A few steps back and to the left gave her a view through the trees of an odd-looking man leaning against one of the limbs. Odd looking, but not a trolloc. She exhaled. *Not a trolloc.*

The man was facing the flames, which she couldn't see but smelled more like rabbit than ever. His clothes all seemed to be made from animal skins with the fur still on, from his crazy quilt of a cloak to his long-haired trousers. She couldn't make out his face, but she could see his beard well enough, a thicket of curly grey and black hair that fanned over half his chest. She guessed his hair was long, too, but she wasn't sure. It was tied back, and from her position she was looking at him nearly head on. She could see the long knife hanging from his belt and the bow propped against a nearby limb. She wished she could move closer, see more, but she hardly dared breathe where she was.

She looked to her right, as if she might be able to see Perrin through the tree. *Where are you?* He would have a much better view than she did, and should be able to see quickly whether they should approach the man or get out of there in a hurry. There wasn't really any in between.

The seconds crept by and Egwene could feel the anxiety winding around her chest. She could also feel her mouth watering at the smell of roasting meat. *Rabbit meat.* She wished Perrin would hurry.

Then the man lifted his head and called out, "Are you two going to hide all night, or are you going to join me? You haven't eaten much these past few

days, and there's no way I can eat six rabbits by myself. Come out, let's have a chat."

Egwene swallowed hard and tightened her grip on the reins.

The Spray

Rand tried to speak but his panic was like a muzzle. He looked at Mat, who was probably no less scared than Rand himself, but had a great deal more experience trying to talk his way out of trouble. Mat gave him a grin, then turned to the stranger.

“We don’t mean no trouble, sir,” Mat said. “We’re just on our way to—”

“Behind you!” Rand shouted. Past the stranger and to the right, a trolloc had pulled itself up and stood balanced on the railing. It held a long spear and wore a sword at its side. Rand couldn’t tell if it was grinning or if the light from the ship’s lamps was just glinting off of the pins piercing its face.

The bearded man turned, and the trolloc raised its spear. Time seemed to slow, then. As the trolloc pulled its arm back, Rand almost thought he could feel the shaft ripping through his spine. *We’re all going to die.* He could already feel the spear tearing him open; he thought his lungs would burst. *I’m going to die.* The trolloc’s arm started forward.

“No!” The shout felt like it took the very last of his breath. He tried to leap away, but the ship lurched beneath him again. The trolloc was struggling to keep its balance when a boom swung out of the shadows to catch it chest-high, lifting it off its feet. Rand heard more than one bone break. The boom kept swinging and would have hit the stranger, but the bearded man easily ducked as it sent the trolloc into the water on the opposite side of the ship. When it swung back, the stranger caught the boom with a crisp *splat* against his broad palm.

“Gelb!” he said. “Fuck me blind! Where do you be, Gelb? You can no hide from me on my own ship. Get Floran Gelb out here!”

A crewman appeared with a bull’s-eye lantern, and two more pushed a narrow-faced man into the circle of light it cast. Rand thought it was the man he had landed on while climbing aboard, but he couldn’t be sure.

“Were you no supposed to secure this boom, Gelb?” the bearded man asked.

Gelb’s eyes went wide. “But I did, Captain Domon. Tied it down tight. I’s a little slow about things sometimes, well and true, but I get them done, I do.”

“So you be slow, do you? No so slow at sleeping. Sleeping when you should be standing watch. We could be murdered to a man, for all of you.”

“No, Captain, no. It was them.” He pointed at Rand and Mat. “I was on guard, just like I was supposed to be, when that one, he snuck up and hit me with a club. I fought him, but then the trollocs came. He’s in league with them, Captain. He’s a-a-a darkfriend.”

“In league with my dead grandmother! Did I no warn you the last time? At Whitebridge, off you do go! Get out of my sight before I put you off now. And secure the boom, or do believe I’ll be feeding you your own balls for breakfast tomorrow. Raw.” He threw the boom at Gelb, who grabbed it and darted out of the lantern light. When he was gone, Captain Domon stood staring out at nothing, opening and closing his hands. “Fuck all, but these trollocs do be following me. Why will they no leave me be? Why?”

The captain’s round face swung toward Rand and Mat. Rand was still trying to think of something to say when Thom appeared.

“Captain,” Thom began with a bow, “allow me to—”

“Another one? Be there any more of you?” Rand and Mat shook their heads. “Alright. Padros! Take these three to my cabin. I’ll be along shortly.”

The crewman with the light and one other escorted them to the captain's cabin, a tidy room below decks in the stern. Rand looked around, but didn't have time to see much before Captain Domon joined them and shoed his crewmen away. The captain took the only chair, motioning the others to find places on various chests and benches.

"Now," he said when they were all seated. "My name be Bayle Domon, captain and owner of the *Spray*, which be this ship. Now who be you, and where be you going out here at the ass end of nowhere?"

"Like I was saying, captain," Mat said, "we're on our way to Caemlyn, and then to—"

"And then where the wind takes us," Thom finished. "That's how gleemen travel, like dust on the wind. I am a gleeman, you understand, Thom Merrilin by name. These two country louts want to become my apprentices, though I am not yet sure I want them." Rand looked at Mat, who grinned.

"That be all very well, but it tells me nothing. Less. That place be on no road to Caemlyn from anywhere I ever heard tell of."

"Now that is a story," Thom said. He proceeded to tell a tall tale, featuring the three of them as treasure hunters looking for old riches in the lost ruins of a city called Aridhol. Thom had spent years piecing together the maps and the tales, and when this winter's snows had melted enough, he set out with a few companions, including his two would-be apprentices. They found the city, but it turned out the treasure had belonged to one of the dreadlords themselves, and trollocs had been sent to fetch it back to Shayol Ghul. Almost every danger they had really faced— trollocs, myrddraal, draghkar, Mashadar— appeared at one point or another of Thom's story. With much derring-do, mostly by the gleeman himself, they escaped every time. But tonight they became separated, and trollocs kept pursuing them all the way to Captain Domon's most welcome ship.

No one said anything when Thom finished. Captain Domon drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair, then finally said, "That be a tale many folk would no believe. Of course, I did see the trollocs, did I no?"

“Every word true,” Thom said, “from one who lived it.”

“And have you any of this treasure with you?”

“Alas, what little we managed to carry away was with our horses, which bolted when those last trollocs appeared. All I have left are my flute and my harp, a few coppers, and the clothes on my back.”

“Hmm. I’d no let my own brother sail with me if he could no pay his passage, especially if he brought trollocs behind him to hack up my railings and cut up my rigging. Now, Bayle Domon be a reasonable man. I’d no toss you over the side if there be a way out of it. I see one of your apprentices has a sword. I need a good sword, and fine fellow that I be, I’ll let you have passage far as Whitebridge for it.”

Before Thom could answer, Rand said, “No!” He’d be cursed if he would let anyone take Father’s sword. They were a long way from home, but as long as he had the sword, a piece of Father stayed with him.

“Well, if it be no, it be no. But Bayle Domon do no give free passage, not to his own mother.”

Reluctantly Rand emptied his pocket. Mat did the same. They had little save lint, some trinkets, and the silver coins Moiraine Sedai had given them. Captain Domon weighed the two fat silver coins on a small set of scales he pulled from a brass-bound chest behind his chair. He dropped the coins in a purse from the same chest and returned some smaller silver and copper to each of them. Mostly copper. “As far as Whitebridge,” he said.

“Dear passage just to Whitebridge,” Thom said flatly.

“Plus damages to my vessel,” the captain said. “Plus a bit for bringing trollocs down on me so I must run downriver in the night when there be shallows aplenty to pile me up.”

“Wh-what about our companions?” Rand asked. “Will you take them, too? They should have reached the river by now, or they soon will, and they’ll

see that lantern on your mast.”

Captain Domon raised an eyebrow. “Lad, we be three, four miles downriver from where you came aboard. Trollocs make men row with a purpose, and the Arinelle’s current be as fast as a whore on the docks of Illian. But it makes no nevermind. I’d no put in again tonight if my own mother did stand on the bank. I may no put in again at all until I reach Whitebridge. I’d had my fill of trollocs dogging my heels long before tonight, and I’ll have no more can I help it.”

Thom leaned forward. “You have had encounters with trollocs before? Lately?”

Domon hesitated. “I wintered in Saldaea, man. Not my choice, but the river froze early and the ice broke up late. I’ve been there before, and there always be talk of trollocs attacking a farm or the like. This winter past, though, farms did burn there every night. Aye, and whole villages, too, betimes. They even came right up to the city walls. I say, I can no wait to get back where people think the stories I tell be traveler’s lies.”

Their audience with the captain ended shortly after that. Once they were on deck, Thom half whispered, half growled that he could have gotten them passage for a few songs and stories if the boys hadn’t been so quick to show silver.

After a few days, Rand believed it. The sailors loved to hear Thom practice his craft. And it was just as well; they weren’t a happy crew, and Thom helped diffuse the tension that Rand began to notice almost as soon as they came aboard.

Bayle Domon drove boat and crew alike hard. The wind was strong but came from the wrong direction, so the sails mostly stayed tied up. They moved slowly, and the captain did not put in, day or night. He railed at contrary winds, cursed their sluggish pace, and flayed the crew with his tongue for every misstep. For two days, he was able to keep them in line with terrifying stories of what trollocs would do if they caught up to them. Then the shock of the trolloc attack began to fade, and men began to mutter

about an hour to stretch their legs ashore, and about the dangers of running downriver in the dark.

No matter how discreet the crew tried to be, Captain Domon seemed to hear everything said on his boat. Each time the grumblings began, he silently brought out the long, scythe-like sword and cruelly hooked axe that had been found on the deck after the attack. He would hang them on the mast for an hour, and those who had been wounded would finger their bandages. The mutterings quieted for a day or so, but no more, and the cycle began again.

So Thom's stories and songs and tricks were a most welcome diversion. The gleeman spent his days slapping backs and telling jokes and putting grins on even the hardest-working men— unless the men were in a complaining mood. Then Thom Merrill stayed clear and took pains to seem uninterested, though Rand couldn't see why. The crew didn't seem to blame the three of them for the trolloc attack. If they blamed anyone, it was Floran Gelb.

Gelb was constantly trying to bend his crewmates' ears, explaining how he was innocent and how Mat and Thom and especially Rand were at fault and not to be trusted. "They're strangers," he said. "What do we know of them? The trollocs came with them, that's what we know. They're in league."

"Stuff a cock in your cake hole, Gelb," a crewman with a long ponytail said on the second day. "You'd call your mother darkfriend if it'd let you slack. Fuck off and get to work." That may have been the politest response Rand heard from a crew that remembered quite clearly the watch Gelb had not kept. No one wanted to work with him, so he got stuck with solitary tasks, all of them filthy, like crawling into the bilges on his belly to search for leaks among years of slime and sludge. Soon he stopped talking to anyone. He walked with his shoulders hunched and a dejected frown on his face. But when he looked at Rand or Mat or Thom, his eyes flashed murder.

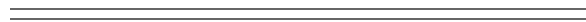
"That man Gelb is going to make trouble for us," he said to Thom one day, "soon or late."

“If trouble comes,” Thom said, “it won’t come from Gelb. None of the crew will back him, and he hasn’t the nerve to try anything alone. But the others? Domon takes the trollocs seriously— he almost seems to think they’re after him personally— but the rest are beginning to think the danger is past. I’d guess they’re right on the edge of mutiny. If they go that route, boy, they won’t leave passengers behind to tell the tale. The Queen’s Writ might not have much force this far from Caemlyn, but even a village mayor would do something about that.”

That was why Thom tried not to be noticed when he watched the crew, and why he worked so hard to amuse them when he could. He told stories, with all the flourishes, every morning and every night, and in between he played any song they requested. Even the lessons he gave Mat and Rand to back up their cover story proved entertaining for the crew. He would not let either of them touch his harp, of course, but their sessions with the flute had the crew laughing even while covering their ears. He also taught the boys some of the easier stories, a little simple tumbling, and juggling— which Mat had a head start at, of course.

Rand filled his days with lessons, with Thom’s stories, and the sailors’, too. He helped when he could, and spent a good deal of time leaning on the railing, looking at the shore. His days were generally pleasant enough, outside of Gelb. But his nights were anything but.

The dreams began on the second night.



Rand stood on the porch of the Winespring Inn, leaning against the railing and looking west into the setting sun. The Green lay before him, bare and burnt and broken. He scanned the village but saw no one. The emptiness was familiar, a memory scratching at the edge of his mind, but when he tried to take hold of it, it slipped through his fingers like smoke.

Rand drifted down the steps and made his way toward the Wagon Bridge, toward the Quarry Road that would take him home.

“In such a hurry?”

Rand turned around to find a man leaning casually in the doorway to the inn. He wore white linen from head to toe— save for a plum pocket kerchief — and a smile that made his eyes sparkle, eyes that were even lighter than Rand’s own. He looked familiar, but Rand couldn’t say from where.

“You’ve only just set out into the world,” the stranger said. “Are you so eager to return to this place?”

Rand hesitated. He *was* supposed to be out in the world. He and Mat Cauthon, in the outlands. They were on a boat. A boat headed... somewhere.

“Who are you?” Rand asked. “Where is everyone?”

“I suppose they are elsewhere.” The stranger didn’t seem to care one way or another. “Come, old friend. You know this place is no home for you. You were ever the great traveler, weren’t you? No one city could hold you, much less a backwater village.”

“Great traveler? I’ve never even left the Two Rivers.” Rand paused. “Though I reckon I *have*, haven’t I? No matter. I’m back now, and I don’t conjure I’ll be leaving again any time soon.”

The stranger laughed softly, and his eyes opened into a great chamber consumed by flames.

Væ’alza. Rand remembered now. He swallowed and looked away, afraid he might fall into the fire.

When he turned around, he did not find the Green, or the Winespring Water. Instead he stood on a vast, flat plain. The sun was high overhead now; if it was not noon, it was near enough. In the distance to his right were some scattered woods, and only grass to his left. But in front of him was the

biggest city he had ever seen, sitting on an island in the widest river he had ever seen, standing in the shadow of the tallest mountain that could possibly be.

Væ'alza walked up beside him as Rand stared, mouth agape, at the scale of what he saw. He tried to look up at the peak of the mountain, but it was wrapped in clouds too high to be fog.

"Do you remember this place?" Væ'alza asked. "It is not as it once was, as it was when you last saw it, but I imagine it stirs a feeling in you yet."

Did it? Was this place familiar somehow? It seemed to tickle at Rand's mind, but that could be strangeness as easily as familiarity. He turned to Væ'alza, who returned his stare a good while before smiling. Behind the man's eyes, the burning room flicked in and out of view.

"Yes," the strange man said, "I think it may, at that."

"No," Rand said, turning back to the mountain. But the mountain was gone. Instead he was surrounded by grand buildings whose like he had never seen. Even the meanest structure seemed a palace; even the least remarkable left his eyes wide and his jaw hanging. *This must be the island city.* It was as empty as Emond's Field had been. A broad street paved with smooth, grey stone stretched straight before him toward a tower that dwarfed every other building in the city, a tower as white as fresh-fallen snow.

He started down the street, walking slowly at first and looking around at the city. He saw now that the mountain had not disappeared, but had just changed position when he had entered the city. How had he entered the city? *There was a man...* His mind was a fog. The harder he tried to remember, the more slippery his memory became. The one certainty was the tower. As much as he tried to take in the city, his eye always came back to the tower, drawn like iron to a lodestone. Eventually he realized he was running as fast as he could, his eye trained on the tower.

Suddenly the street opened into a huge square that seemed as big as the plain. *The plain?* Rand came to a stop and surveyed the square, turning this way and that with his hands on his hips as he fought to catch his breath. A memory flickered and danced at the edge of his mind but refused to make itself known plainly. It didn't matter. He was finally at the foot of the tower. For the first time he saw that it rose from a great palace of pale marble, not built so much as sculpted— or grown, even. Yes, it seemed almost alive, curving walls and swelling domes and delicate spires fingering the sky.

Rand took a few steps forward.

“And here? Is this where you mean to go? I thought maybe the mountain.”

Rand spun around. Behind him stood Væ'alza, hand in his pockets and walking as if without a care in the world. Rand remembered.

“Væ'alza.”

“Yes.” The other man wore a smirk, as though he were humoring Rand. “You do so struggle to hold on to your thoughts here. As do the others. If you are the one, you do yourself no favors lowering yourself to this new name and body.”

The others? Væ'alza looked him up and down. Rand felt like cheap meat at market. He swallowed.

“This is no place for us, old friend,” Væ'alza said. “Only Aes Sedai lies draw you here. Aes Sedai are not what they once were. They are not to be trusted. Whatever they promised, it is not what you think. That much you know already, if you ask yourself. Come, find me and I'll free you from the chains that pull you toward this foul and fiendish place.”

“There's no freedom with you,” Rand said. “Your servants deal in death and anguish. I saw what you did in Emond's Field.”

The man laughed and his eyes sparkled. “Yes, well.” Then the smile disappeared and his face took on a grim look. “That fight was with the

witch. Trace that violence back. You will not find me. No, that line leads there.” He pointed to the tower rising high above them.

And Rand knew where they were. *The White Tower. Tar Valon.* He looked over his shoulder. *Dragonmount. Where Lews Therin—*

“Search your heart. You know it true,” the man said. “We were friends before. We shall be again. If we are not...” He tilted his head and squinted at Rand. “No, I’ll not think on it. And if you are not he, it will be of no matter.”

Rand thought of Father. “*Aes Sedai are tricky, lad. They never lie outright, but the truth they tell you is not always the truth you think it is.*” Was this all a scheme? Could he trust anyone? He certainly didn’t believe Væ’alza. Whatever the man said, the things that had been chasing after him and Perrin and Mat, the things that had claimed the lives of half a dozen Emond’s Fielders— no friend had sent those things. But that didn’t mean he was wrong about Aes Sedai. *I wish Father were here. He’s been in the outlands. He’d know what to do, whom to trust.*

But Father wasn’t there, and Væ’alza was a poor proxy. Rand looked at the other man. “My heart doesn’t call you friend, stranger. I’ll take my leave now.” He looked at the tower, the White Tower, and considered trying the gate before turning back the way he had come.

But when he turned, he did not see the street he had just run down. The buildings, the city, were gone. So was Dragonmount. Instead, he faced a column— tall, but not half the height of the White Tower— that looked to be made of pure metal. Its solid steel gleamed in the overcast sunlight.

All around him was thick, unspoiled forest. It looked as if nobody lived within miles of this place. But how could such a tower exist without people? Rand took a closer look. He walked around it twice without seeing any opening— no door, no window, no seam, not even a scratch on that smooth, sheer wall. It didn’t seem to have been built by the hands of men at all.

“And do you remember this?” a man’s voice came from behind him, but Rand did not turn around. “Standing here for time stretching far beyond memory or record. Unchanged and unchanging. The world broke, but not the Tower of Ghenjei.”

Where was I just now? Rand knew he had been elsewhere, but he couldn’t remember anything before turning to see this metal tower. He shook his head but it didn’t get any clearer. *Where was I?* Rand remembered a street, paved, at least four spans across. He was running, running toward something. He was in a city.

“The Tower may be unchanged, but times are not,” the man said. “We may chat idly now, but the time is fast approaching when you must make a decision, when you must choose where you will meet your fate, and with whom.”

Rand took a step closer and inspected his reflection in the curved metal of the tower. He tried to remember. He was in a city. A city with another tower. And before that, a plain, and a village. He knew the village. It was empty, but even still he knew it. It was... it was...

Emond’s Field.

He had been in Emond’s Field. Then the plain, then Tar Valon. All in the span of a few minutes. It was impossible. Rand turned around to find Væ’alza standing there.

“This is a dream,” said Rand.

Væ’alza smiled, and the fires blazed behind his eyes. “And who is the dreamer, old friend?”

The fires erupted and Rand shut his eyes by reflex. When he opened them, he stood atop an impossibly tall cliff. He fought down a quick stab of fear and peeked over the edge, but nausea overcame him before his eye could find the bottom. He did see that the wall of the cliff was almost completely sheer, with only a few jagged outcrops reaching toward the sky. If there

were any path down, it was hidden by a strange ivy that covered the cliff face, ivy with no leaves but many cruel black thorns.

Dizzy, Rand covered his face with his arm and went to one knee.

“Remember,” said a voice behind him, “dreams are not always safe.”

Rand turned around and saw a man dressed in white linen, with fires burning behind his eyes.

“Sometimes,” the man said, “they are the most dangerous place you can be. I will see you again.”

Rand stood frozen as the man covered the distance between them with one slow step and then pushed him in his chest. Time seemed to slow like molasses in winter as Rand flew over the edge of the cliff. He reached out to grab the ivy, but when he felt a thorn prick his finger— *gouge* his finger, it felt like— he drew his hand back without thinking. His finger started to burn and throb immediately, and time seemed to resume its normal speed. The wall flew by him as the top of the cliff sped ever farther away.

This is all a dream. The wind was like a storm in his ears. *This is all a dream.* He twisted around to gauge how far it was to the bottom and how fast it was approaching, but he still could not see it.

This is all a dream. Rand closed his eyes. *A dream.* What was he supposed to do? He took a deep breath. *This is all a dream. But dreams aren't safe.* Rand opened his eyes. How could he escape a dangerous dream? How could he...

Wake up.

Rand opened his eyes.

Rand sat up panting. It was dark, with just a pale light poking through the window above him. A rough wool blanket covered him to his shoulders. He could feel smooth wooden planks under his hands. Deck planks. Rigging creaked in the night. He let out a long breath. He was on the *Spray*. It was over. For now, at least.

Without thinking he put his finger in his mouth. At the taste of blood, he stopped breathing. Slowly he put his hand close to his face, to where he could see in the dim moonlight, to where he could watch the bead of blood form on his fingertip. Blood from the prick of a thorn.

For the next few nights, Rand paid close attention to his dreams. All were strange and unsettling; some were even terrifying. But for as long as Rand was aboard the *Spray*, Væ' alza did not invade his dreams again. And soon enough the prick from the thorn had healed, and even his waking thoughts were untroubled by the man dressed all in white.

As the river rolled along, Captain Domon would tell them stories about the things they passed. Most of these seemed too fantastic to Rand to believe, though he was less inclined to dismiss them than he would have been just a month before. He paid close attention, though, when Thom asked the captain about the sun glinting off of something in the distance to the east.

"That do be metal," Domon said. "A tower of metal. I have seen it close up, and I know. River traders use it as a marker. We be ten days from Whitebridge at the rate we go."

"A metal tower?" Rand asked.

"Aye. Shining steel, by the look and feel of it, but no a spot of rust. Two hundred feet high, it be, as big around as a house, with no a mark on it and never an opening to be found."

It's real. Rand tried to think of what he should ask, but his tongue was tied in knots.

"What's it for?" asked Mat. "It must be something important."

“Mayhap, lad,” the captain said. “I know not. But there be stranger things in the world than the metal tower. On Tremalking, one of the Sea Folk’s isles, there be a stone hand fifty feet high sticking out of a hill, clutching a crystal sphere as big as this vessel. There be treasure under that hill if there be treasure anywhere, but the island people want no part of digging there, and the Sea Folk care for naught but sailing their ships and searching for the Coramoor.”

Rand didn’t care about the Sea Folk right now. “What about the metal tower. Is it old?” he asked. “Does it have a name?”

“If it do,” said the captain, “nobody knows it. It be that old. From the Age of Legends, some do say. Who made it and why, those things do be lost to time. That tower, and the stone hand, and the line of kings carved a hundred feet tall into the bluffs just south of us, stretching half a mile on either side of the river— there do be strange things all around us. And it be the strangeness that makes for seeing the world, that pulls you to the next horizon. In Tanchico, on the Aryth Ocean, part of the Panarch’s Palace were built in the Age of Legends, so it be said. There be a wall there with a frieze showing animals no man living has ever seen.”

“Any child can draw an animal nobody’s ever seen,” Mat said.

The captain chuckled. “So they can. But can a child make the bones of those animals? In Tanchico they have them, all fastened together like the animal was. They stand in a part of the Panarch’s Palace where any can enter and see. The Breaking left a thousand wonders behind, and there have been half a dozen empires or more since, some rivaling Artur Hawkwing’s, every one leaving things to see and find. I’ve gathered a few such trinkets myself. I’ve seen more— lightsticks and razorlace and heartstone. Things you never dreamt of, in more places than you can see in ten lifetimes. That be the strangeness that will draw you on.”

Rand thought about bones he used to dig up in the Sand Hills, when he would go camping alone or with Father. Strange bones. Once he’d found part of a fish— he thought it was a fish— as big as the *Spray*. The only fish

you could find out there now were the little ones he would catch and fry for his meals. He remembered eating those little fish, staring up at the stars, feeling so alone, so different. He'd lie by the fire, longing—*desperately* longing—to be in Emond's Field, to have village friends and lead a normal, village life. Wanting the village, and hating it, too. They were altogether miserable, those outings to the Sand Hills. But how much further removed was he from Emond's Field now? Would he ever get back there—and if he did, would he ever truly belong?

He didn't feel any more at home on the *Spray*. Mat was no more his friend here than he had been in the Two Rivers, and the crewmen saw them both as oddities, sundry extras thrown in with the gleeman. Rand couldn't blame them, really. Mat was, well, not hostile, exactly, but not friendly either. Every day he seemed a little more withdrawn. The charm that Rand had always envied in Mat seemed in short supply on the *Spray*. And Rand, for his part, was behaving no less oddly.

Four days into their trip downriver, Rand climbed atop the mast, sitting on the blunt end with his legs wrapped in the stays. The *Spray* rolled gently on the river, but fifty feet above the water that easy roll made the top of the mast sway back and forth through wide arcs. He threw back his head and laughed into the wind that blew in his face.

The oars were out, and to Rand the boat looked like some twelve-legged spider creeping down the Arinelle. He had been this high before, in trees back in the Westwood, but now no branches blocked his view. Everything on deck—the sailors at the sweeps, men on their knees scrubbing the deck, men doing things with lines and hatchcovers—it all looked so odd when seen from right overhead. He had spent an hour just watching them and chuckling, until he lost interest and started staring instead at the riverbanks flowing by, at the whole world moving past him.

On sudden impulse he unwrapped his legs from the stays bracing the mast and held his arms and legs out to either side, balancing against the sway. For three complete arcs he kept his balance like that, then it disappeared and he toppled forward, lucky to grab the forestay. Legs splayed to either

side of the mast, nothing holding him to his precarious perch but his two hands on the stay, he laughed. Drawing deep, desperate breaths of the fresh, cold wind, he laughed with the exhilaration of it.

“Lad,” he heard Thom say, “if you’re trying to break your fool neck, don’t do it by falling on me.”

Rand looked down. The gleeman clung to the ratlines just below him, staring up the last few feet grimly. “Thom,” Rand said with a wide grin, “Thom, when did you come up here?”

“When you wouldn’t pay any mind to the people shouting at you from below. Burn me, boy, you’ve got everybody thinking you’ve gone mad.”

He looked down and was surprised to see all the faces staring up at him. Only Mat, sitting cross-legged up in the bows with his back to the mast, was not looking at him. Even the men at the oars had their eyes raised, letting their stroke go ragged. Captain Domon, standing by the steering oar with his ham-sized fists on his hips, was too busy glaring at Rand to berate them for it. Rand turned back to Thom, still grinning. “You want me to come down, then?”

“I would appreciate it greatly,” said Thom with a sharp nod.

“Alright.” Shifting his grip on the forestay, he sprang forward off the mast top. Thom cursed as Rand cut his fall short, dangling from the forestay by his hands. The gleeman scowled at him, one hand half stretched out to catch him. Rand grinned. “I’m going down now.”

Swinging his legs up, he hooked one knee over the thick line that ran from the mast to the bow, then caught it in the crook of his elbow and let go with his hands. Slowly, then with increasing speed, he slid down. Just short of the bow he dropped to his feet on the deck right in front of Mat, took one step to catch his balance, and turned to face the boat with arms spread wide, the way Thom did after a tumbling trick.

Scattered claps rose from the crew, but he paid them no mind once he saw what Mat was holding, hidden from everyone else by his body. A curved dagger with a ruby in the pommel. The scabbard looked shoddy, but the blade itself looked fine enough. Mat slid it in and out of its sheath until he saw Rand standing above him. He gave a start and stuffed the dagger under his coat.

Rand squatted on his heels, with his arms crossed on his knees. “Where did you get that?” Mat said nothing, looking quickly to see if anyone else was close by. They were alone, for a wonder.

“I found it. I found it in Shadar Logoth, while I was out in the city.” He squinted at Rand. “You won’t tell anybody, al’ Thor. They might try to steal it, and do who knows what to *me* by the by.”

“I won’t tell anybody,” Rand said. “Captain Domon strikes me honest, but I wouldn’t put anything past the rest of them. Especially Gelb.”

“*Nobody*, al’ Thor. Not Domon, not Thom, not anybody. We’re the last two left from Emond’s Field. We can’t risk trusting anybody else.”

The last two.

“They’re alive, Mat. Egwene? Perrin? They’re alive. I—I know it.” Mat looked away then. Whether out of shame or pity, Rand couldn’t say. “I’ll keep your secret, though. Just the two of us. At least we don’t have to worry about money now. We can sell it for enough to travel to Tar Valon like kings.”

“Of course,” Mat said after a long pause. “If we have to. Just don’t tell anybody until I say so.”

“I said I wouldn’t.” Rand was annoyed at having to make the same promise more than once. Mat didn’t seem to trust the last Emond’s Fielder left, either. He decided to change the subject. “Listen, have you— have you had any more dreams since we came on the boat? Like in Baerlon? I have. I wanted to ask you about it, but someone is always around.”

Mat was silent. “Maybe,” he finally said.

“What do you mean, ‘maybe’? Either you have or you haven’t.”

“Alright, alright, then. I have. I don’t want to talk about it. Don’t even want to think about it. Won’t do a lick of good.”

Before either of them could say more Thom came striding up the deck, his cloak over his arm. The wind whipped his white hair about, and his long mustaches seemed to bristle when he spoke. “I managed to convince the captain you aren’t mad, that it was part of your training.” He caught hold of the forestay and shook it. “That fool stunt of yours helped, sliding down the rope, but you’re lucky you didn’t break your bloody neck.”

Rand’s eyes went to the forestay and followed it up to the top of the mast. His mouth dropped open. He had slid down *that*? And he had been sitting on top of...

Suddenly he could see himself up there, arms and legs spread wide. He sat down hard next to Mat, and barely caught himself short of ending up flat on his back. He felt lightheaded, and his breaths felt too shallow no matter how deeply he inhaled. When Thom spoke, his voice sounded far away.

“I had no idea you had such a good head for heights, lad. We might be able to play in Illian, or Ebou Dar, or even Tear. People in the big cities in the south like tightrope walkers and slackwire artists.”

“But we’re going to—” Rand looked around to make sure no one was close enough to overhear. Several of the crew were watching them, including Gelb, glaring as usual, but none could hear what he was saying. “To Tar Valon,” he finished. Mat shrugged as if it were all the same to him where they went.

“At the moment, lad,” Thom said, settling down beside them. He took two balls, one red and one green, and twirled them idly in his hand. “But tomorrow, who knows? Such is the life of a gleeman.”

Rand looked back up at his former perch and shivered. Mat sat close on his left and Thom on his right, but he felt just as lonesome as the flag atop the mast, whipping around in the wind.

The Greatest Need

Nynaeve came awake with a start when she felt someone grab her wrist and pull. She was still in the hollow with her back against the oak. Slivers of daylight were beginning to crawl through the branches above her, but the sun was not high enough to light the hollow, and she could not see who— or what— had taken hold of her.

She scrambled to her feet and tried to wrest her arm free, but the grip only tightened. Panic was creeping up from her gut; she could feel it all the way in her throat, and knew she would scream when it reached her lips. She gave one last, desperate tug, and almost laughed in relief when she heard Clover whinny and shuffle her feet. She stifled the laughter and clasped a hand over her mouth to make sure nothing slipped out. This was still dangerous land. When she finally felt composed, she took her hand from her mouth and unwrapped Clover's reins from around her wrist.

Fool woman. You'll not last long in the outlands if you can't stay awake one night.

A look around the hollow revealed nothing but Clover and some mushrooms growing on a fallen log. Nynaeve climbed to the lip of the hollow and peeped over. Nothing stood between her and the river save about ten paces of loose soil and a handful of ash trees, their cracked bark and bare branches making them seem dead. The far bank had even fewer trees, just some scattered clumps of evergreens, willows, and firs. *Nowhere to hide over there. The younglings are likely still on this side.* Nynaeve sighed. *That, or they crossed anywhere within ten miles in either direction.*

She listened to the wind, but it told her nothing of the children, or of anything else. The wind had lost its voice many moons ago.

Nynaeve grabbed Clover's reins and left the shelter of the hollow to look for her charges. She set off downriver; if she didn't find anyone, the river would take her to Whitebridge eventually, and a road would take her to Caemlyn after that. She stayed on foot, leading her mare. The woods were dense enough that riding would save her little time, and she wanted to be able to see any sign that one of her party might have left. Her father had taught her tracking and trapping before he died, and she wasn't half bad.

Her skills did her no good here, though. She found tracks here and there, plenty of them, but her best efforts could not say whether those who made them had been searching or chasing or pursued. And she never saw a sign that she could definitely say came from any of those she sought.

She had covered perhaps four miles when the wind brought her a whiff of woodsmoke. It came from further downriver, and not too far, she thought. She hesitated only a moment before tying Clover to a fir tree, well back from the river in a small, thick stand of evergreens she hoped would hide the mare. The smoke could be from one of hers, or it could be from the fire beneath a trolloc cookpot. The only way to find out was to look.

Crouching, she slipped from tree to tree. She stopped at the sound of a horse, then crept closer, holding her skirts up so they didn't catch on anything. *I really must remember to wear trousers the next time I go stalking.* Peering cautiously around the trunk of an ash, she saw the warder dismounting in a small clearing on the bank. The Aes Sedai sat on a log beside a small fire where a kettle of water was just coming to a boil. Her white mare browsed behind her among sparse weeds.

Nynaeve exhaled and felt her shoulder and hands and crouching legs unclench. *I never thought to be so relieved to see those two.* She was still a dozen spans away, and three or four trees short of the clearing. She picked a path forward, walking on her toes and avoiding any twigs or leaves that

might crunch underfoot and make her presence known. She hoped to overhear some of their conversation.

When Nynaeve got to the edge of the clearing, she crouched down behind the wide tree she had chosen, closed her eyes, and listened.

“...no sign at all?” Moiraine was saying. “Hard to believe. There were a thousand here last night if there were a dozen. And they numbered far more than a dozen.”

The Aes Sedai stood up as she finished talking, Nynaeve could hear it in her breath. She heard some shuffling; if she had to guess, she would say the woman was removing the kettle from the fire, probably to brew some tea. She opened her eyes and slowly peeked out from behind the tree. Moiraine was bent over the kettle facing away from Nynaeve. A small smile touched Nynaeve’s lips when she saw the Aes Sedai stirring the kettle. *Tea, just so. But where is—*

“Wisdom,” a voice said from behind her. Startled, Nynaeve felt her whole body squeeze together like a hand making a fist. She recovered quickly and turned to face the warder. His face was as stony and calm as ever. “Perhaps you would like to join us.”

Nynaeve glared at him standing above her. Neither his voice nor his face betrayed any feeling, but she was sure he was feeling satisfied and smug. *That, or it galls me to have been caught so unawares.* She resolved that the warder was smug.

“Now that I see you’re not trollocs,” Nynaeve said, standing up, “I think I shall.”

“Well met, Wisdom,” the Aes Sedai said. “It is good to see you unharmed.”

“Yes, thank you,” Nynaeve said. “And you as well. Have you seen any sign of the children? I’ve walked here from upriver, maybe four miles, and any tracks I’ve seen have been a mess.”

“No,” the man said. “No clear sign of the children, or the gleeman, either.”

“But some sign of the shadowspawn,” Moiraine said. “What were you saying, Lan?”

“They are all gone,” Lan said grimly. “Four halfmen started south about two hours before dawn, as near as I can tell— they don’t leave much trace behind— but the trollocs have vanished. Even the corpses, and trollocs are not known for carrying off their dead. Unless they’re hungry.”

Nynaeve’s stomach turned.

Moiraine poured herself some tea. “Care for some tea, Wisdom?”

Nynaeve was thirsty, and she was glad to have found the Aes Sedai and warder, but she still bristled at the thought of accepting any kindness from the older woman.

“Thank you, Aes Sedai, but no.”

Moiraine held the pot out toward Lan, but he waved off her offer and crouched by the fire. He warmed his hands, then looked back and forth between Nynaeve and Moiraine.

“Well, go on,” the Aes Sedai said. “I am sure the Wisdom is as interested as I. Our lots are thrown in together now. We cannot guard every fact so jealously as we might like. Now. Finish your thought, please.”

Lan returned his eyes to the fire. “You know my thought as well as I. How did a thousand trollocs come here, more than two thousand miles south of the Blight? They were not here on Winternight, else we’d have seen them in the Two Rivers. So they must have come after. After we crossed the Taren, when one myrddraal and a hundred trollocs had proven inadequate. But how? How were they sent? How did they vanish? If a thousand trollocs can be brought here secretly with such speed— and taken off again the same way— it won’t be long ere we see ten thousand sent into the heart of Saldaea, or Arafel, or Shienar. The Borderlands could be overrun in a year.”

“The whole world will be overrun in five if we do not find those boys,” Moiraine said. Nynaeve still did not understand how those fool boys could be of any importance to the Two Rivers, much less the world. “Your questions are good, and they gnaw at me, as well. But I have no answers. The Ways are closed, and no Aes Sedai has been powerful enough to Travel since the Time of Madness. Unless one of the Forsaken is loose, there is still no one who can— and if that is so, our peril is greater than that posed by any thousand trollocs, or ten. In any case, I doubt all the Forsaken together could move a thousand trollocs. Let us deal with the problems that face us here and now; everything else must wait.”

“The boys.”

“I have not been idle while you were away. One is across the river, alive. Of the others I could find but a faint trace downriver that faded away nearly the moment I found it. They sail toward Whitebridge, but more than that I cannot say. The bond had been broken for hours before I began my search.”

“Wait,” Nynaeve said, “what’s that? What bond? What have you done to those boys? You’ll not ensnare them in any of your Aes Sedai plots, may lightning strike me if I lie.”

Instead of answering, the Aes Sedai took a long last sip of tea, looking at Nynaeve over the top of her cup before she put it down, empty. “Lan, it seems we have learned what we can here. We must away. South, I think. Would you make ready, please?”

How dare...? Some people had a nasty habit of disagreeing with Nynaeve — most of them on the Village Council— but no one had simply ignored her since she became Wisdom. “Look here, Aes Sedai, I asked you a question. What have you done to those boys?”

If Moiraine took issue with Nynaeve’s demanding tone, she showed no sign. Her serene smile never wavered.

“Why south?” Nynaeve went on. “You said one of the boys is across the river. And how do you know?”

Lan emptied the tea kettle over the fire and stirred the ashes with a stick. When the fire was dead, he packed their saddlebags, blankets, and the rest of their things up behind their horses' saddles.

"I will fetch your horse, Wisdom," he said as he finished with the last saddle tie.

"I have done nothing to harm any of the children, Wisdom. I only gave each a token, creating a bond of sorts between them and me. So long as they stay alive and keep those coins, I will be able to find them."

Nynaeve was horrified. "What, you bonded them, like... like warders?" She pointed at Lan, who had just finished packing his and Moiraine's saddlebags, blankets, and other things up behind their horses' saddles. He did not look at her, or in any way acknowledge the conversation between the two women.

"Do the boys even know?" Nynaeve finished.

Moiraine let out a small, short laugh. "Worry not, Wisdom. Those boys are not warders. No, the coins I gave them allow me to discover if they still live, and find them should we become separated. No more than that. I think you will agree it was a reasonable precaution."

Nynaeve scoffed. "I'll not take cues on reasonableness from the woman who brought trollocs down on Emond's Field, then took the children out deeper into danger. Nothing is reasonable that ties my people more closely to you."

Moiraine's smile never wavered, and she just looked at Nynaeve, like she was patiently waiting for something.

"Though I suppose," Nynaeve finally said, "if it will help us find them..."

"It will. And to answer your question, Wisdom, I would gather the young man across the river first, if I could. He is but a few miles from us, I would say. But I cannot afford the time it would take. With the trollocs gone, he

should make his way down to Whitebridge safely enough. The two who went downriver may need me more. They have lost their coins, and the halfmen either pursue them or aim to intercept us all at Whitebridge.” She sighed. “I must take care of the greatest need first.”

“How do we know the fades didn’t— didn’t kill those two?” Nynaeve asked.

Moiraine shook her head slightly.

“Well then where is Egwene? You haven’t even mentioned her.”

“I do not know,” Moiraine said. “I hope she is safe.”

“You don’t know? You hope? All that talk about saving her life by taking her to Tar Valon, and she could be dead for all you know!”

“I could look for her and allow the halfmen more time in their pursuit of the two boys who went south. It is them the Dark One wants, not Egwene. The halfmen would not care about her one way or the other; their quarry is all that matters.”

“So the best you have to offer is that she may be alive, if she’s lucky. Alive, maybe alone, frightened, even hurt, days from the nearest village or help except for us. And you intend to leave her.”

“And she may just as easily be safe with the boy across the river. Or on her way to Whitebridge with the other two. In any case, no trollocs remain to menace her, and she is strong, intelligent, and quite capable of finding her way to Whitebridge alone if need be. Would you rather stay on the chance that she may need help, or do you want to try to help those we know are in need? Would you have me search for her and let the boys— and the halfmen who are surely pursuing them— go? As much as I hope for Egwene’s safety, Wisdom, I fight the Dark One. That sets my path.”

Nynaeve hated when the Aes Sedai called her Wisdom. It was a title of high regard that sounded more like a common name, a nickname even, in Moiraine’s calm and measured voice. Nynaeve was used to commanding

respect in Emond's Field, admiration, even a touch of wonder. *This woman makes me feel a child.*

But Nynaeve's feelings were not important at the moment. Egwene and the boys were what mattered, and Nynaeve was being made to choose between them. *A Wisdom cares for **all** of her people.* She felt the clench in her jaw and shoulders.

"Here is Lan," Moiraine said, standing and wrapping her cloak about her shoulders.

Nynaeve did not realize he had stepped away, but there he was, emerging from the wood, leading Clover by the reins.

"Well, Wisdom," Moiraine said. "We are off to find the two boys who have gone down the river. You are free to come with us, or to choose another path. But we leave now."

Nynaeve looked at the Aes Sedai, and at her warder. "It seems that to save the children from you, I must search for them with you."

"The Wheel turns in most unexpected ways of late," Moiraine said as she mounted her white mare. "Perhaps I should have spoken to Min again."

Nynaeve didn't know what to make of that, but she didn't much care. She took one last, long look at the forest before mounting Clover. *Egwene, I hope you are safe. One way or another, I will find you and I will take you home. This I vow.*

Nynaeve was now without the closest thing she had to a friend in this affair, paired instead with the danger she had come to save the children from. As surely as they were trying to find some of the children, they were leaving others behind. But the Aes Sedai was right about one thing. They had to take care of the greatest need first. She clucked Clover forward and pulled up to the Aes Sedai's right. The warder went ahead, scouting their path. On they went, following the river, hunting for children who were hunted by fades. And Nynaeve didn't look back.

Wolfbrother

The sweat ran in creeks and runnels down Perrin's back, his chest, his arms. His gloves kept his hands from getting slippery as he swung the hammer. The ring of hammer striking iron seemed to echo everywhere until it was like a single, never-ending tone from a bell the size of the world.

Perrin barely heard it. His focus to the metal was absolute, though he didn't know what he was making. He lost all track of time, and the world seemed to become only this moment, this hammer strike. Nothing before, nothing after. He paused to return the iron to the fire when a chill passed over his slick skin, from the back of his neck down to his fingers and the bottom of his spine.

"Who's there?" he shouted, turning around. The smithy was empty, but the sun had fallen and he could not see anything in the night beyond the smithy walls. *Someone is watching me.* He did not think. He knew. *Something.* The echoing ring died away. In the silence, he could hear the eyes on him.

He looked left and right, straining to see anything in the black of the night. Instead, the darkness seemed impossibly thick. Not even the moon or stars, or the forge fire spilling past the smithy walls, showed him what lay out there.

After a moment, Perrin realized it was no longer silent. A soft growl was rising in his ears. He spun and spun again, desperately looking for whatever beast made the fearsome sound. Louder and louder it grew, but still he saw nothing.

Soon the growl was deafening, almost a roar. And then Perrin realized it came from his own throat.

Perrin sat up, shaking and covered in a cold sweat. The dream was like every other he'd had the past few nights. The setting was different— this time it was the smithy, the last time it had been the Green on Sunday, before that reading a book by the fire— but the heart of it was the same: feeling eyes on him, eyes hidden in darkness, a silent darkness that threatened to drown him, until he woke up, shaking and covered in a cold sweat.

The growling is new, though.

Perrin shook himself. It was no use getting himself in a panic over a few dreams. At least the man with the flames in his eyes hadn't shown up since those first few nights after Shadar Logoth. Væ'alza was... unsettling. He exhaled and looked around the camp. Egwene was asleep, curled up where the fire had been. Elyas slept, too, a little farther out, as he had every night since they had met up. Perrin supposed the man thought he and Egwene would be more comfortable with a little distance between them, but Perrin didn't care. If Elyas meant to gut them, a few paces between bedrolls would not save them.

Perrin was still unsure what to make of their new companion. He seemed pleasant enough, if odd. He clearly did not spend much time around people. He called himself a lone nomad, wandering Asur as his feet saw fit. He had no horse and, besides his weapons, carried only a bedroll and a small bag that held clothes— like the ones he wore, made from animal skins— and a few sundries, like his flint. A right strange way to live, but Perrin didn't mind at all since Elyas actually knew where Caemlyn was. The route they had been traveling would have taken them a hundred miles north of Caemlyn, if not more. Or so he'd told them through guffaws of laughter

after they'd said where they were headed. Perrin took Elyas at his word. He wasn't sure why, but he trusted the strange man.

At least, he trusted him some. It was hard to trust when you felt false yourself. That first meeting, held while they tore hungrily into Elyas's roast rabbit, was mostly a string of lies from Perrin and Egwene. When his laughter had quieted, Elyas had asked them where they'd come from, and why they were going to Caemlyn.

Egwene told the story. Not the true story, but one they had come up with in those first days after crossing the Arinelle, a story they hoped would explain themselves without letting anyone know where they were really from, or where they were really going. Who knew what careless word might reach a halfman's ear? They had worked on it every day, patching it together, hammering out flaws.

They were from the north, from farms outside a tiny Saldaean village. Neither of them had been more than twenty miles from home before this. But they had heard gleemen's stories, and merchants' tales, and they wanted to see some of the world. Caemlyn, maybe even Illian and the Sea of Storms.

Perrin had thought it a good tale, and Egwene told it well. Considering how little they knew of the world outside the Two Rivers, he doubted old Thom Merrilin could have done much better.

Elyas was quiet for a moment, looking them over. When his eyes met Perrin's, the young man shivered. That was something he had not gotten used to: Elyas had yellow eyes. Not just light, like Rand's or Lan's. Yellow. They looked completely alien. Still, they seemed familiar somehow.

"From Saldaea, eh?" Elyas had asked.

"That's right." This was Perrin's bit. "We thought to go Maradon way first. Ain't never seen the King. But the capital's the first place our das would look."

Egwene was better with words than he, so she got the main of the story. But Perrin had a small part of his own: to make it plain they had never been to Maradon. That way no one more traveled than they would expect them to know anything about the city. Everything in their tale was a long way from Emond's Field, a long way from Winternight. Nobody hearing it would have any reason to think of Tar Valon, or Aes Sedai, or shadowspawn come south.

It had done the job, anyway. Elyas had believed them, and even offered to help set them on a true course for Caemlyn. He wouldn't go into the city with them—he wasn't overly fond of people, especially in large groups—but he would walk with them a while, make sure they were headed in the right direction.

That had been three days ago. Since then, they had spent each day traveling south and east, from sunup to sundown. Egwene and Perrin took turns riding, but Elyas walked the whole way. Egwene's insistence on splitting time ahorse evenly made no impression on the man. And it made no difference, as Elyas set a faster pace than the one they had been traveling at before. He may have scorned the haste of city men, but he did not waste time when there was somewhere to go.

They paused only when someone spotted a rabbit or a squirrel, which pretty much meant when Elyas spotted a rabbit or a squirrel. He seemed to have a knack for it; Perrin didn't see a quarter of the game Elyas did. And every animal Elyas saw seemed to fall to his long throwing knife. Perrin could see he was well suited to life in the wild.

This day passed much as had the three prior. The others were up and packed not long after Perrin, and they were on the move before the sun had cleared the eastern horizon. No one said much. They stopped briefly for lunch—what was left of last night's rabbit—but otherwise kept steady on. About an hour before dark, Elyas shot down a fat pheasant with his bow. The evening meal was a feast—roast pheasant, with tubers and even a few leafy greens they had found.

Elyas told them a story while they ate, about some old Hunter of the Horn who had crossed the Caralain Grass, who might have supped right where they were supping. It was a pleasant enough evening, and Perrin fell asleep easily after lying down for the night.

Perrin awoke in a smothering heat, a weight on his chest and a foul, hot wind blowing on him.

And pain.

He forced his eyes wide and pushed himself back, trying to escape whatever was above him. He felt a sharp pain on the side of his neck and cried out. Standing over him was a massive grey wolf. It had bitten him on the neck, and he could feel the warm blood. He brought his hand quickly up and found his throat was still there, though blood was coming from the left side of his neck. *Why would it attack me in my sleep, teeth at my neck, and not rip my throat out?* He scooted further back. The wolf just stood there, staring at him with those yellow eyes.

“Help!” he cried. “Egwenel!”

“There, there, boy.”

Perrin looked to his left and saw Elyas sitting on a log. He didn’t make a move to help. He just stared at him with those yellow eyes.

“It’s done now.”

“What are you on about, old man?” Perrin was not one to raise his voice, but he felt the words roaring from his mouth as he pushed himself backward, away from the wolf who stood unmoving over his bedroll, breathing heavily, blood smeared across its mouth. “What’s going on?”

“What the— ? Perrin!” Egwene scrambled to him, taking a knee at his side and cradling his head in the crook of her arm. She pressed the sleeve of her nightshirt hard against the bite. “It’s alright, Perrin. You’re gonna be alright.” She rocked his head slightly, humming under her breath. Perrin could barely hear it even with his ear at her chest.

She took her hand off of his neck and checked the wound. “It’s alright,” she said, exhaling. “It’s not that bad. Here, you cover it. The bleeding is already getting slower.” He wrapped his sleeve around his hand and slipped it under hers. Egwene took her arm from around his neck and leaned over toward the fire, grabbing the iron pan.

The wolf’s lip curled back and it started to growl.

“Wouldn’t do that,” Elyas said. “If they think you mean harm, they’ll stop being friendly.”

“They?” Egwene asked, letting go of the pan. The wolf stopped growling with a snap of its jaws, then let its tongue loll out as it breathed easily.

“F-Friendly?” said Perrin, checking his sleeve to see how much he was bleeding.

On the far side of the fire, Bela gave a fearful whinny and pulled at her reins, wrapped loosely around the low branch of an oak that almost scraped the ground. Perrin looked around and saw half a dozen hulking shapes approaching. More wolves. *They*. The wolves stayed at the edge of camp, but they made sure their arrival was noticed. Bela reared and twisted, screaming.

“Quiet the mare,” Elyas said. “They won’t hurt her. Or you, if you’re still.”

“See here, what is all this?” Egwene asked. Her voice had a slight quiver, but she sounded composed, not at all timid. Perrin was impressed. *Then again, she ain’t the one bleeding out the neck.* “What do you know about these wolves, Elyas? What are they doing here? Why do they sit back?”

“These,” Elyas said, “are my friends.”

Three of the wolves drew up close to the first, still standing over Perrin’s bedroll. Perrin was sure they had the measure of all three of the campers, but he felt as if their eyes stayed trained on him.

“Wolves are no friends to men,” Egwene said. “Say true, why are they here? Why do they sit back? Have you tamed them somehow?”

The man snorted. “Men tame better than wolves, girl. These are no pets to beg scraps at supper. They keep me company, and I them. We hunt together, converse, after a fashion. Just like any friends. Isn’t that right, Dapple?”

The first wolf, the one that had bitten Perrin, turned its head to look at Elyas. *Yellow eyes*. The wolf’s fur looked to be a dozen shades of grey, dark and light, fading into one another.

“You— you talk to them?” Perrin asked. He had thought Elyas simply odd, but perhaps the man was not in his right mind at all.

Eilis paused, considering. “It isn’t talking, exactly. The words don’t matter, and they aren’t quite right, either. Her name isn’t Dapple. Were there a word that meant the way shadows play on a forest pool at a midwinter dawn, with the breeze rippling the surface, and the tang of ice when the water touches the tongue, and a hint of snow before nightfall in the air, well, that would come close. But it still wouldn’t be her name. It’s more of a feeling. That’s how wolves talk.”

“You’re mad,” said Perrin. He was at the edge of his patience and calm.

“You think you can talk to wolves? You think you can— Why did your friend there bite me? Ask the bloody beast why it attacked me in my sleep.”

“I don’t need to ask. I know. They chose you.”

“Chose me for what?”

“Do you think this thing can be learned by anyone who wills it? It’s a Talent. Either you’re born with it or you’re not. But even if you’re born to

it, it'll do you no good less the wolves choose you." Elyas pointed a stick at him. "They chose me. Now they've chosen you."

The man's eyes glinted in the firelight. *Yellow eyes. A wolf's eyes.* Could it really be? Perrin looked at Egwene, kneeling a few feet to his right, but she was a bit in front of him and he couldn't catch her eye. She stayed focused on Elyas.

"What do you mean a Talent? Like the One Power?"

"This world has more mystery in it than just the Power, girl. This has naught to do with the Power, nor with the Dark One. This is a thing of men, and wolves, and the dreams they share. The wolfbrothers have been a long time gone— so long that you'll not find them even in our tall tales. But the wolves remember hunting with men, in the way that they remember all things. Wolves remember things differently than we do. Every wolf remembers the history of all wolves, or at least the shape of it. Like I said, it can't be put into words very well. They remember running down prey side-by-side with men, but it was so long ago that it's more like the shadow of a shadow than a memory. But the wolfbrothers come again." Elyas paused and looked at Perrin. "Me. You. Maybe others."

"You're daft," Perrin said. "Even if we believed your mad tale about talking to wolves, and hunting with wolves, and wolves remembering history, I've never had aught to do with the beasts."

Elyas barked a laugh. "You know on their timeline, not yours, boy. It wasn't till I was a man grown— with a good many more winters under my belt than you've under yours— that they found and chose me. I had a whole life that... well, that I had to leave behind. Or rather, that left me behind, chased me out, tried to hunt me down, when they discovered what I was. And that didn't happen till the wolves chose me and a pack leader drew my blood. That's when I started to learn the talk of wolves, and to learn the things I've shared with you tonight. You're chosen now, boy. The rest will follow."

Perrin checked his wound. The bleeding seemed to have stopped. *Just a shallow bite, then.* Could all of this be true? Was there another reason the

beast might have drawn blood but no more? Perrin remembered his wolf carving, made without thinking, and shuddered.

“Well, why now?” he asked. “Why ‘choose’ me now?”

“They knew you had the Talent when we first came across you days ago. They were excited, of course. They’ve heard of other men who can talk to wolves, but you’re the first they’ve ever met besides me. But we all thought it best you meet me first. And things changed when you lied to me that first night.”

This time Egwene did look back at Perrin, and he saw the same worry in her eyes that she must have seen in his.

“Easy. They know you’re no darkfriends. It’s why they’ve finally chosen you. But when you kept secrets of halfmen and trollocs, well, the wolves were suspicious. Dapple smelled them in your mind while the girl told that fool story of yours. They all did. Wolves hate trollocs and halfmen worse than wildfire, worse than anything. So do I. And somehow, you’re mixed up with them.”

Egwene scooted back till she was even with Perrin and laid her hand on his.

“That first night, Burn there wanted to be done with you.” Elyas nodded toward one of the four wolves standing in their camp. The nod was not enough to identify the wolf he was talking about, but Perrin guessed he meant the one had an old scar on his shoulder. “It was trollocs gave him that mark when he was a yearling. Game is scarce, and you’re fatter than any deer he’s seen in months. But Burn is always impatient. Dapple hung back, and watched you in your dreams. Tried to learn your mind, your heart. She is convinced you’re no darkfriends, and she leads this pack. So she came tonight and made her mark.”

That can’t be. Perrin slipped his hand from Egwene’s. *My dreams. My dreams these last few nights...* He felt foul and roiling, and not two inches from panic.

“So, boy, why don’t you tell me about it? Just remember, they’ll know if you lie, and even Dapple won’t be able to stop them if they find she’s misjudged you.”

Dapple sat down and stared at him. *Blood and ashes, her eyes look **just** like his.* The other wolves, Burn included, lay down at Dapple’s feet. They stared at him, too, and looked no less ready to strike for having lain down. Perrin looked at Egwene. She shrugged and raised an eyebrow. *No reason she should have any better ideas than I. And I have none.* Dapple started to growl softly.

“We’re waiting, boy.”

“Alright,” Perrin said, “alright!” The growling cut off, sharp and sudden. He nodded to Egwene, and she back to him. “It all started a few days before Winternight,” he began, “when our friend Mat saw a man in a black cloak...”

Elyas never changed his expression or the way he sat on that log, but Perrin could feel the man listening more intently, and the wolves did not take their eyes off him. It was a long story, and he told almost all of it. The dream he and the others had had in Baerlon, though, he kept to himself. He waited for the wolves to make some sign they had caught him holding back, but they only watched. He was hoarse by the time he finished.

“...and if she don’t find us in Caemlyn, we go on to Tar Valon. We ain’t got no choice except to get help from the Aes Sedai.”

“Trollocs and fades this far south,” Elyas said. “Now that’s something to consider.” He rooted behind himself and tossed Perrin a hide waterbag, not really looking at him. He appeared to be thinking. When Perrin had drunk and replaced the plug, he spoke again. “I don’t hold with Aes Sedai. The Red Ajah, those that like hunting for men who mess with the One Power, they wanted to gentle me, once. I told them my Talent had nothing to do with the Power, but they wouldn’t listen. So I told them to their faces they were Black Ajah. They served the Dark One, I said. Not that I thought they were. I was just weary of their foolishness. So I said it. Black Ajah. Well,

they didn't like that much. They couldn't catch me, though, once I got into the forest. But they tried. Yes, they did. It was a mess of a tangle. I had to kill a couple of warders. Bad business, killing warders. Don't like it. Yes, I keep clear of Aes Sedai, mostly, and clear of their friends, as well. You will, too, if you're smart."

"Anyone would like to stay away from Aes Sedai," Perrin said. Egwene gave him a sharp look. "But we've had trollocs chasing us, and fades, and those bloody beasts in the sky. Everything but darkfriends. We can't hide, and we can't fight back alone. So who is going to help us? Who else is strong enough, except Aes Sedai?"

Elyas was silent for a time, looking at the wolves, most often at Dapple or Burn. Perrin shifted nervously and tried not to watch. When he watched, he could almost hear their conversation. Understand it. *Impossible. This is a mad jest. I **can't** talk to wolves.* One of the wolves looked at him and seemed to grin. *Hopper.* Now why had he thought that?

"You could stay with me," Elyas said finally. "With us." Egwene's eyebrows shot up, and Perrin's mouth dropped open. "Well, what could be safer? Trollocs will take a chance to kill a wolf by itself, but they'll go miles out of their way to avoid a pack."

"I don't know." Perrin avoided looking at the wolves. Still, he could feel Dapple's eyes on him. "For one thing—"

"We are going to Caemlyn," Egwene said firmly. "And then to Tar Valon."

Closing his mouth, Perrin gave her an angry look. "What about you, Perrin?" he said, and answered himself. "Me? Well, let me think. Yes. Yes, I think I'll go on." He gave Egwene a flat smile. "Well, Egwene, that's both of us. I guess I'm going with you, at that. Good to talk these things out before coming to a decision, ain't it?" She blushed, but her jaw stayed set and steady.

"Dapple said that's what you'd decide," Elyas said with a grunt. He looked at Egwene. "She said you have both feet planted firmly in the human world,

baby Aes Sedai. And you,” he said, pointing at Perrin, “you, you stand halfway between. Under the circumstances, I suppose we’d better go south with you. Otherwise, you’ll probably starve to death, or get lost, or—”

Burn stood up, and Elyas stopped to look at the big wolf. After a moment Dapple rose, too. Burn turned toward her, and she met his stare. They were frozen like that for a long moment, then Burn whirled and vanished into the night. Dapple shook herself, then resumed her place as if nothing had happened.

Elyas met Perrin’s questioning eyes. “Like I said, Dapple runs this pack. Some of the males could best her if they challenged, but she’s smarter than any of them, and they all know it. She’s saved the pack more than once. But Burn thinks we’re wasting time with you three. Hating trollocs is about all there is to him, and if there are trollocs this far south he wants to be off killing them.”

“Of course,” Egwene said with a sigh. “We really can find our own way. With a nudge in the right direction, of course. If you’d be so kind.”

Elyas waved a hand. “In the morning, I’ll start south with you, and so will they. The night is getting old. Let’s try to get some more rest before the sun rises.”

Dapple and the others got up and trotted away. Perrin went back to his bedroll, marked now with a spray of blood that had almost dried. He could *feel* the wolves leaving, sinking back into the night. He told himself it was only his imagination, but it felt real. Sleep never came as he looked up at the stars that night. The sky was clear and cold, and he could make out a dozen constellations, but his eyes stayed fixed on the moon. More than once he heard wolves howl in the night, and he knew they were looking at that same moon. In his mind he heard a word, or the scent of a feeling of an idea, and he knew it didn’t come from him.

Wolfbrother.

Whitebridge

The midmorning sky was grey and shapeless when the lookout's voice cried out, "Whitebridge! Whitebridge ahead!"

Mat watched as men dashed about the boat. Bare feet slapped against the deck as they hauled on ropes, tying off some lines and untying others. Some brought up big oilskin bags stuffed almost to bursting with wool, while others readied cables as thick as a man's wrist. They all moved quickly, but no one seemed to be rushing. Mat wondered how many times he would need to dock a ship before he could do it as easily and naturally as this crew. A thousand? Ten thousand? However many times they had done this, they were not skilled enough to suit Captain Domon. He still stomped up and down the deck, shouting orders and cursing those who were moving too slowly.

Mat had heard tell of the White Bridge in song and stories and peddlers' tales, but found himself uninterested in seeing the truesworn thing. As they rounded a slight bend in the Arinelle, the bridge came plainly into sight, but Mat was focused more on the crew. The bustle made the perfect cover for some knave to make mischief. As a mischief maker himself, Mat was well aware.

Still, the White Bridge soon dominated the sky, and Mat could not help but look. It arched high over the wide waters and stood twice as high as the *Spray's* mast, maybe more. From end to end it gleamed milky white in the sunlight, gathering the light until it seemed to glow. Standing on spidery piers that seemed too frail to hold its weight, the bridge leapt the river with an airy grace that almost made the eye forget its size. The whole thing

looked of a piece, as if carved from a single stone. All in all, it dwarfed the city that sprawled about its foot on the east bank. Houses of stone and brick as tall as those in Taren Ferry looked like doll's houses, and long wooden docks like twigs floating in the water. The small fishing boats that filled the Arinelle from bank to bank looked like a swarm of gnats in the shadow of the White Bridge, shining and towering above it all.

"Is it glass?" al' Thor asked.

"Nay, lad," said Captain Domon. "I do no know what it be, but it no be glass. No rain do make it slippery, and no chisel do mark it, no matter how hard it be struck."

"A remnant from the Age of Legends," Thom said. "I have always thought it must be so."

The captain spat on the deck. "Mayhap. Still useful despite. And besides, it do no *have* to be Aes Sedai work. It need no be so old as that." He grunted and spat again, then turned and hurried down the deck.

Mat looked after the captain for a moment. *He seems a mite nervous. Bears watching, that does.*

"Well, we made it, Thom," al' Thor said.

"Aye, and without a mutiny, even," Mat said under his breath.

He must not have spoken as softly as he thought, because Thom harrumphed and two sailors readying a cable nearby gave him a queer look before bending quickly back to their work. Mat just grunted and spat over the rail.

The *Spray* turned smoothly in beside the first pier. Oarsmen brought the ship to a stop, then sailors tossed cables to men on the dock, who fastened them down. Two men brought the gangplank out and dropped it in place.

"Let's go get our things together, boys," Thom said. "Whitebridge—"

“You!” Captain Domon’s booming voice brought everyone on deck up short. It was more a roar than a shout, and it put Mat in mind of a bear. A *very unhappy bear*. The captain jabbed his thick finger in the air, and on the other side stood Floran Gelb. “You’ve slept on watch for the last time on my vessel! Or on any vessel, if I have my way of it. Choose which side—the dock or the river—but you get off my ship. Now.”

Gelb didn’t even bother to look to his former crewmates for support. He just muttered a curse, turned, and headed below to the crew’s quarters. At a gesture from Captain Domon, two sailors followed him down and back again. Mat nodded to himself. *Smart. Can’t trust that one alone*. When Gelb returned with his belongings strapped to his back, he threw a hateful glare at Mat, at Thom, and most especially at al’ Thor. The captain watched with arms crossed as his former crewman slunk down the plank, pushed past the small crowd of people on the pier, and vanished into town. *Good riddance*.

Mat went down to gather his things. He didn’t have much besides the clothes he was wearing—his saddlebag (now with a long strap, like a haversack), his blanketroll, and his staff. And the dagger, of course. He patted his coat to reassure himself that it was still there. He didn’t trust any of these people, and the dagger helped him feel a mite safer. He took a breath and returned to the deck.

Al’ Thor was leaning against the rail, gazing out at the people on the pier. “No sign of the others,” he said.

Most of the people were workmen, fishermen, sailors, and the like. But there was a small group of townspeople who had apparently come out just to see the *Spray* dock. Mat figured that was normal; it was probably the first boat of the year to come downriver from Saldaea. Why wouldn’t people want to see? Still, he couldn’t shake the feeling that darkfriends could be hiding within that crowd. He patted the dagger again. Al’ Thor was right. No one here looked at all like Perrin, Egwene, or any of the others.

“Maybe they didn’t come down to the dock,” al’ Thor said.

“Maybe,” Thom said, walking up behind them with his own things thrown over his shoulder. “Keep an eye out for Gelb. He’ll make trouble if he can. Best we pass through Whitebridge so softly that we’re forgotten as soon as we leave.”

The three of them made their way to the gangplank, but Captain Domon hastened to stop them before they could debark.

“You be leaving me now, gleeman?” he asked, looking at Thom. “Can I no talk you into continuing on? I be going all the way down to Illian, where folk have a proper regard for gleemen. There be no finer place in the world for your art. I’ll get you there in good time for the Feast of Sefan. The competitions, you know. A hundred gold marks for the best telling of *The Great Hunt of the Horn*.”

“A great prize, Captain,” Thom said, giving an elaborate bow and a flourish of his cloak. “Those are indeed great competitions, which rightly draw gleemen from the whole world over. But I fear we could not afford the fare at the rates you charge.”

“Aye, well, as to that...” Captain Domon pulled a leather purse from his coat pocket and tossed it to Thom. It clinked when Thom caught it. “There be your fares back, and a bit more besides. The damage was no so bad as I thought, and you’ve worked your way and more with your tales and your harp. I could maybe manage as much again if you stay aboard to the Sea of Storms. And I would set you ashore in Illian, where a good gleeman such as yourself can make his fortune, competitions or no.”

Mat eyed Domon warily. *Why so eager for us to stay aboard?* He waited for Thom to reject the captain’s offer, but the gleeman Just stood there weighing the purse on his palm. “Sorry, captain,” Mat said. “We’re meeting friends here and then going on to Caemlyn together. We’ll have to see Illian another time.”

“Perhaps,” Thom said, “if the people we are to meet are not here.”

“Aye,” Domon said. “Well, you think on it. It should be a fair leisurely sail. Without Gelb aboard to take the others’ anger, I expect I’ll have to ease up now. It’ll be a wonder if it no take three times as long. Well, so long as those trollocs do no return. If I be lucky, they really *were* after you three.”

“I wish they weren’t, my good Captain,” Thom said. “We should never have gone chasing that treasure.”

“Aye, aye,” the captain said, but he didn’t sound convinced. Mat felt a sudden need to get off the boat and onto land. Domon scratched at his beard, then pointed at Thom’s pocket. “Twice that if you come back. Think on it. I sail with the first light on the morrow.” With that he turned on his heel and returned to his conversation with the crewman.

When Thom still hesitated to leave, Mat nudged him toward the gangplank. He was not at all interested in remaining on the sea captain’s boat, and he didn’t plan to let the gleeman extend their stay even a minute longer. Thom sighed and made his way down to the dock, where his patch-covered cloak elicited a murmur in the crowd and a few calls asking where he would be performing. *So much for not being noticed. Bollocks.* By sundown everyone would know there was a gleeman in town.

“Your cloak will land us in a trolloc’s cookpot soon enough,” Mat said.

“Let’s get away from this crowd,” al’Thor said, “and see about finding the others.”

Thom stopped. “An innkeeper will be able to tell us if they’re here, or if they’ve passed through. The right innkeeper, anyway. Innkeepers have all the news and gossip. If they aren’t here...” He looked back and forth from Mat to al’Thor. “We have to talk, we three.” He set off away from the river and into the town, cloak swirling around his ankles.

Once they moved inland from the riverbank, Mat saw that Whitebridge was just as big as Baerlon, if not quite so crowded. A few carts moved in the streets, pulled by ox or donkey or horse. Shops lined the streets, every kind of shop you could imagine. Many of the tradesmen worked out front with

their signs swinging in the wind above them. They passed a man mending pots, and a tailor holding folds of cloth up to the light for a customer. A shoemaker sat in his doorway tapping his hammer on the heel of a boot. Hawkers cried their services at sharpening knives and scissors. It didn't look like those selling fruits and vegetables had anything better to offer than their counterparts in Baerlon. Even the fishmongers displayed only small piles of small fish, despite the many boats on the river. *We're all gonna starve, weather don't change soon.*

They came upon the big square at the foot of the White Bridge. It was no wonder Thom thought this place dated back to the Age of Legends. Even the paving stones in the square looked ancient, worn down by countless generations of feet and wagon wheels. Mat saw inns and shops and tall, red brick houses with signs out front. Thom surveyed the options and made for The Wayfarers' Rest, an inn that looked to Mat just like every other one there.

The common room stood empty except for the fat innkeeper drawing ale from a barrel and two men in rough workman's clothes staring glumly into their mugs at a table in the back. Only the innkeeper looked up when they came in.

"Brisk day out there, eh?" Thom said, rubbing his hands together. "Is there somewhere my friends and I could talk without being disturbed?"

The innkeeper nodded to a shoulder-high wall that split the room in two from front to back. "The other side that's as best I've got unless you want to take a room. Normally it's for separating crews what's got grudges against each other. Sailors always got grudges, and I won't have my place broke up by fights." He eyed Thom's cloak and cocked his head to the side. "Say, you staying? Haven't had a gleeman here in some time. Folks would pay real good for something as would take their minds off things. I'd even take some off on your room and meals."

"You are too generous," Thom said. "Perhaps I will take up your offer. But for now, a little privacy."

The innkeeper bowed his head, then made off toward the kitchen.

Thom sat down at a table right in the middle of the large space, even though the tables on the far side were all empty. It left Mat feeling awfully exposed. But when he asked about it, Thom said being in the middle meant that no one could listen in without their knowing. That made sense to Mat, though he still felt unprotected there.

“Unbelievable,” Thom said once they were all seated. “Take some off? I’d double his custom just by sitting here. Any honest innkeeper gives a gleeman room and board and a good bit besides.”

The bare table was none too clean, and the floor had not been swept in days. Maybe weeks.

“Let’s not stay here longer than we need to,” Mat said. “This place is foul. Don’t see why you couldn’t have picked a cleaner inn.”

“Why?” Thom said. “Straight on from the bridge is the road to Caemlyn. Anyone passing through Whitebridge comes through this square, unless they’re going by river, and we know your friends aren’t doing that. There’s word of them here, or there’s word of them nowhere in town. Now see here, let me do the talking. This has to be done carefully.”

Just then the innkeeper appeared, three battered pewter mugs gripped in one fist by the handles. The fat man flicked at the table with a towel, set the mugs down, and took Thom’s money. “If you stay, you won’t have to pay for your drinks. Good wine, here.”

Thom gave an empty smile that never reached his eyes. “I will think on it, friend. But first, what news is there? We have been away from hearing things.”

“Big news, that’s what. Big news.” He draped the towel over his shoulder and pulled up a chair. He introduced himself as Bartim, and the first news he offered was about the bunions on his feet, and how good it felt to be off his feet, and what he would soak his feet in that night. When Thom cleared

his throat and drank some wine, Bartim finally paused and seemed to remember why he had sat down in the first place.

“Down Lugard way,” he said, “the Aes Sedai took Logain captive. The false Dragon, you see. After a big battle outside the city. Logain was trying to move his army from Ghealdan to Tear. The Prophecies, you see.” Mat didn’t see at all, but Thom nodded and the innkeeper went on. “Well, he never made it, of course. Now the roads in the south are packed with people, thousands fleeing in all directions. Not a one supported Logain, of course. Oh, no, you won’t find many to admit to that now. Just refugees trying to find a safe place during the troubles.”

Bartim seemed pleased enough at Logain’s capture, but none too enamored of his captors. Every time he said “Aes Sedai,” he spat on his own floor. *Probably why it’s so filthy.* He spat again when he said they were taking the false Dragon north to Tar Valon. Bartim was a decent man, according to Bartim, and he’d get no closer to an Aes Sedai than a thousand miles if he had his way. Of course, he smiled when he said that they were stopping at every village and town on the way north to show that Logain had been taken and the world was safe again. He would have liked to see that, even if it did mean getting close to Aes Sedai. He was halfway tempted to go to Caemlyn.

“Get to see a false Dragon and the Queen in one trip,” he said. “Not bad. Never seen the Queen before. Seen the last false Dragon, but wasn’t much to that one. Logain, they say he can do things. Not like the last one. Didn’t need no Aes Sedai for him. Just chained him to a wagon. People throwing rocks and sticks. Pathetic. But this Logain, he’d be something to see, a tale to tell the grandchildren.” He sighed. “The inn would never let me get away, though.”

Mat looked around. He had trouble taking the innkeeper at his word. First he said he wouldn’t go within a thousand miles of Aes Sedai. Then he said he’d get up close to them if he could see the false Dragon. Then he said he would *not* go to see the false Dragon because the inn kept him too busy. But

the inn plainly had no custom, and it wasn't as if Bartim were filling his hours keeping the place tidy. What were they supposed to believe?

"That would be something to make a story of," Thom said. "A story they'd tell for a thousand years. I wish I had been there. I might try to see him anyway. What route are they taking? Or if you haven't heard, might there be some other travelers around we could ask."

Bartim waved a grubby hand dismissively. "North, that's all anybody knows around here. You want to see him, go to Caemlyn. That's all I know, and if there's anything to know in Whitebridge, I know it."

"No doubt you do," Thom said. "I expect a lot of strangers passing through stop here. Your sign caught my eye from the foot of the bridge."

"Aye, and not just from the west, either. Two days ago a fellow came in here, an Illianer, with a proclamation all done up with seals and ribbons. Read it right out there in the square. Said he's taking it all the way to Cairhien, maybe even to the Borderlands, if he can find safe passage. Said they've sent men to read it in every land in the world."

Thom leaned forward. "What did the proclamation say?"

"Why, the Hunt, of course," Bartim said. "The Hunt for the Horn. Didn't I say that? The Illianers are calling on everybody as will swear their lives to gather in Illian. Can you imagine that? Swearing your life to a legend? Fellow claimed the Last Battle was coming, and they need to find the Horn of Valere before it happens. Silly, that. Though with this winter, I don't know. What do you think?"

Thom didn't seem to hear him. With a far-off look in his eye, he started chanting softly.

*In the last, lorn fight
'gainst the fall of long night,
the mountains stand guard,*

*and the dead shall be ward,
for the grave is no bar to my call.*

“That’s it,” the innkeeper said with a grin. “*The Great Hunt of the Horn*. You tell that one and we’ll have fifty bodies perched high in the rafters. Everybody’s heard about the proclamation.”

Thom still seemed to be lost in his own head. After a long pause, al’ Thor spoke up. “We’re looking for some friends who were coming this way. From the west. Have there been many strangers passing through in the last week or two?”

“Some,” Bartim said slowly. “There’s always some, from east and west both.” He narrowed his eyes and looked at them each in turn. “What do they look like, these friends of yours?”

Al’ Thor opened his mouth but shut it quickly when Thom, back from his reverie, gave him a sharp look. Bartim narrowed his eyes further, as if *they* were the ones who couldn’t be trusted. Finally Thom gave an exasperated sigh and turned to the innkeeper. “Two men and three women,” he said. “They may be together, or maybe not.” He gave thumbnail sketches, painting each one in just a few words— enough for anyone who had seen them to recognize without giving away anything about who they were.

Bartim ran his fingers through his thinning hair and stood up slowly. “Forget about performing here, gleeman. In fact, I’d appreciate it if you drank your wine and left. Leave Whitebridge, if you’re smart.”

“Someone else has been asking after them?” Thom took a drink, seeming surprised but not at all concerned. “Who would that be?”

Bartim clicked his tongue and looked around; they were still the only ones on their side of the room. He raised up on his toes and looked over the low wall. When he finally spoke, it was in a whispered rush.

“A few days ago, he come for the first time. All in black he is. Keeps the hood of his cloak pulled up so you can’t see his face, but you can feel him

looking at you. Feels like an icicle shoved into your spine. He...he spoke to me.” He flinched and chewed at his lip before going on. “Voice like a snake crawling through dead leaves. Fair turned my stomach to tar. Every time as he comes back, he asks the same questions. He don’t come or go— he’s just *there* all of a sudden, where he wasn’t before. And then, he isn’t. Gatekeepers claim as they never seen him pass, in or out. People are starting to look over their shoulders.”

Mat kept his head down. He didn’t want to see al’ Thor’s face, nor Thom’s. Their eyes would only confirm what Mat didn’t want to be true. *A fade. Here. For us.*

It was Thom who finally spoke up. “I think I’d remember if I ever met anyone like that,” he said.

Bartim bobbed his head up and down. “Burn me, but you would. Burn me.”

“And you are sure this man was looking for the same people we are?”

“Some of them. The fighting man, and the woman in silk. But he didn’t care about them so much as three country boys he said would be with them.” His eyes darted toward Mat and al’ Thor before returning to Thom. Mat ran his finger along the edge the dagger hidden beneath his coat. “Also said they had a girl and a gleeman. A white-haired gleeman.”

Thom’s eyebrows shot up. “A white-haired gleeman? Well, I’m hardly the only gleeman in the world with a little age on him. I assure you, I don’t know this fellow, and he has no reason to be looking for me.”

“That’s as may be. But if you’d seen him, you’d ken me. I don’t mean to cross him, you see. But I’ll tell you what I told him. I haven’t seen a one of them, nor heard tell of them, and that’s the truth. Not any of them.” He stood and threw Thom’s money down on the table. “Just finish your wine and go. Alright? Alright?” And he walked away as fast as he could without running.

“A fade,” al’ Thor said when the innkeeper was gone. “I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised.”

“Nor should you be when it comes back,” Thom said, leaning across the table and lowering his voice. “Which it will. I say we sneak back to the boat and take Captain Domon up on his offer. They’ll be looking for us on the road to Caemlyn while we take the river to Illian, a thousand miles from where the halfmen expect us.”

“No,” al’ Thor said. “We wait for Egwene and the others in Whitebridge, or we go on to Caemlyn. One or the other. That’s what we decided.”

“That’s mad, boy. Things have changed. You listen to me. No matter what this innkeeper says, when a halfman stares at him, he’ll tell all about us down to what we had to drink and how much dust we had on our boots. As for Caemlyn... well, you think the fades don’t know you want to get to Tar Valon? It’s a good time to be on a boat headed south.”

“No.”

Mat looked at Thom, then into his cup of wine. *Good luck changing a Two Rivers boy’s mind, old man.*

“Think, boy,” the gleeman said. “Illian! As great a city as the world has to offer. And the Great Hunt of the Horn! The first in near four hundred years. A whole new cycle of stories waiting to be made. Just think— by the time the fades figure out where you’ve gone to, you’ll be old and grey and so tired of watching your grandchildren you won’t care if they do find you.”

Al’ Thor’s face took on the same ornery look Mat had seen a hundred times back home. He did not mind it so much this time. “How many times do I have to say no? They’ll find us wherever we go. They’d be waiting in Illian, just as sure as Caemlyn. And how do we escape the dreams? I want to know what’s happening to me, and why. Mat Cauthon may not care, and Perrin Aybara may not either. But burn me, I do. I *will* find out. I’m going to Tar Valon— with Moiraine Sedai if I can, without her if I have to. *Alone*, if I have to.”

“But Illian, boy! And a safe way out, downriver while they’re looking for you in another direction. Blood and ashes, a dream can’t hurt you.”

Mat thought of Væ’alza. “*Dreams are not always safe.*” Now he wished he had talked to al’Thor about that dream when he’d had the chance.

Al’Thor stayed quiet now. Thom lowered his voice. “Even *those* dreams, lad. They are still just dreams, aren’t they? Mat, talk to him.”

Mat wasn’t sure how he had gotten dragged into this, or how he was going to drag himself out. More, he wasn’t at all sure what this gleeman was even doing here with them. What kind of man joined an Aes Sedai and Warder and a bunch of country kids to get chased by darkfriends and shadowspawn? What was his angle? “Why are you making such a fuss and bother?” Mat asked. “You want to go back to the boat? Go back to the bloody boat. We’ll take care of ourselves.”

The gleeman’s laugh was silent and mirthless, and when he spoke his voice was tight and red. “You think you know enough about halfmen to escape by yourself, do you? I see, you’re ready to walk into Tar Valon alone and hand yourself over to the Amyrlin Seat. Can you even tell one Ajah from another? Boy, if you think you can even *get* to Tar Valon alone, you tell me to go.”

“Go,” Mat said. His lip curled up and his hand slid under his cloak. Al’Thor looked at him with his eyes wide.

Raucous laughter broke out on the other side of the low wall dividing the room.

“Trollocs?” a voice said. “Give off, man! You’re drunk, telling Borderland fables!”

They all turned toward the wall at that. Al’Thor stood just a little, then ducked back down. “Gelb,” he whispered as he dropped back into his chair.

Mat let out a low groan. He raised his eyes just above the wall and saw Floran Gelb at the table in the back with the two men who had been there when they came in. They may have been laughing at him, but they were listening, too. So was the innkeeper, though he pretended not to as he wiped down a table.

Mat sat back down. So did Thom, who had made his own quick study.

“No, no,” they heard the second man say. “Trollocs are real. Or, they were, before they killed them all in the Trolloc Wars.”

“Borderland fables!” the first man said again.

“It’s true, I tell you.” That was Gelb, that little worm of a man. “I’ve been in the Borderlands. I’ve seen trollocs, and these were them just as sure as I’m sitting here. Those three claimed the trollocs were chasing them, but I know better. That’s why I wouldn’t stay on the *Spray*. Those three are darkfriends for sure. I tell you...” Laughter and coarse jokes drowned out the rest of what Gelb had to say.

How long before Gelb offered a description of “those three”? How long till the innkeeper heard it? Or would the innkeeper even need a description, with three perfect strangers here in his inn? Mat looked for an exit, but there was just one door to the common room, and they couldn’t get there without walking right past Gelb’s table.

“Maybe the boat ain’t such a bad idea,” he said softly.

Thom shook his head. “Not anymore,” he said, speaking quickly and quietly. He pulled out the leather purse Captain Domon had given him and divided the money into three piles. “That story will be all through the town in an hour, whether anybody believes it or not, and the halfman could hear any time. Domon isn’t sailing until tomorrow morning. At best he’ll have trollocs chasing him all the way to Illian. Which seems to be what he expects, anyway. Not that that does us any good. There’s nothing for it but to run, and run hard.”

Mat and al'Thor looked at their coins before stuffing them in their pockets. Mat didn't have any fat silver coins with a lady holding a flame in her hand. Too bad, that. Money was money, though, and the silver weighed the same.

"That's in case we're separated," Thom said. "We probably won't be, but if it happens... well, you two will make out alright by yourselves. You're good lads. Just keep clear of Aes Sedai, for your lives."

"I thought you were staying with us," Mat said with a squint. It seemed everyone around him was speaking with two mouths.

"I am, boy. I am. But they're getting close now, and you never know. Well, no matter. Nothing is likely to happen." Thom paused and looked at Mat. "I hope you no longer mind me staying with you," he said dryly.

Mat shrugged. He eyed each of them, then shook his head. "I'm sorry. I'm — I'm just on edge. I can't seem to shake it. Every time we stop for a breath, they're there, hounding us. I feel like somebody's staring at the back of my head all the time. What are we going to do?"

Laughter erupted on the other side of the wall, broken up again by loud protests from Gelb that he was telling the truth. Mat sank lower in his chair. It wouldn't be long until Bartim connected Gelb's three with the three of them.

Thom eased his chair back and came off into a crouch. No one looking casually from the other side would see him. He motioned for them to follow, whispering, "Be very quiet."

On either side of the fireplace on their side of the wall were windows that looked out into an alleyway. Thom studied one of the windows carefully for a moment before drawing it up just enough for them to squeeze through. It barely made a sound. Mat scarcely heard it, and he was a foot and a half away.

Once in the alley, Mat started for the street straight away, but Thom caught his arm. "Not so fast. Not till we know what we're doing." Thom lowered

the window again as much as he could from outside, and turned to study the alley.

Mat didn't see anything, save half a dozen rain barrels, and wondered what Thom was looking at. *Or is he just stalling for some reason?*

"See here," Mat said. "Why are you doing all this? You'd be safer if you left us. Why are you staying with us? What's in it for you?"

Thom stared at him for a long moment, then sighed. "It's the Aes Sedai. You boys... I had a nephew. Owyn." He shrugged out of his cloak and made a pile with his blanketroll, carefully setting his cased instruments on top. "My brother's only son, my last living kin. He got in trouble with the Aes Sedai, but I was too busy with... well, with other things. I don't know what I could have done, but when I finally tried, it was too late. Owyn died not long after. You could say Aes Sedai killed him. Since then..." He straightened up but didn't look at them. "I saw you lads were about to get swept up in Aes Sedai plots, and thought maybe I could help. Might be I could offer a little protection, keep you free of Tar Valon. Then maybe I could stop thinking about Owyn. Wait here." He hurried to the mouth of the alley, slowing before he reached it. After a quick look in either direction, he strolled into the street and out of sight.

Mat started to follow him, then settled back. "He won't leave these," he said, touching the leather instrument cases. "You believe that story?"

Rand squatted patiently beside the rain barrels. "Blood and ashes, Mat Cauthon. What's the matter with you? Even at your least friendly, you're not like this. Have you laughed even once since the night we lost the others?"

"What's wrong is I don't like being hunted like a bloody rabbit, al' Thor," Mat said. He sighed and let his head fall back against the brick wall of the inn. He closed his eyes. "Sorry. It's just the running, and all these strangers, and— and just— just everything. I'm all kinds of jumpy. Everyone I see, I worry they'll tell the fades about us, or cheat us, or rob us. Or worse."

Al' Thor didn't say anything. He either felt the same or thought Mat was mad. "What do you think the Aes Sedai did to his nephew?" he finally said.

"I don't know," said Mat. *Only one kind of trouble a man gets into with Aes Sedai.* "Not like us, I guess."

"No. Not like us."

For a time they leaned against the wall, not talking. It was a few minutes, more than like, but it felt like an hour, every moment tense. But Thom didn't come back, and Gelb and the innkeeper never opened the window and denounced them for darkfriends. Then someone turned into the alley from the street, a tall figure whose face remained hidden in the hood of a cloak that was as black as night against the light of the street. *Fade.*

Mat scrambled to his feet, swallowing hard and sliding his hand under his cloak. Al' Thor was in a crouch with a hand on the hilt of his da's sword. The fade came closer, and Mat slid his hand further into his cloak, taking hold of the hilt of the dagger. Then, with only about a span separating them, the halfman tossed back the cowl. Mat felt his knees tremble. It was Thom.

"Well, if you don't recognize me," the gleeman said with a grin, "I guess it's a good enough disguise for the gates."

Thom pushed past them and began moving things from his gleeman's cloak to his new one, which Mat now saw was dark brown, not black. That did little to slow his heart, though, and he kept his hand on the hilt of his dagger. Better wary than wounded.

When he had emptied his old cloak, Thom began folding it into a bundle around his instrument cases, inside out so the patches were hidden. "We'll walk out of here one at a time," he said without looking up, "just close enough to keep each other in sight. Shouldn't be remembered especially, that way." He stood with his bundle and looked at al' Thor. "Can't you slouch, boy? That height of yours is as bad as a banner." He slung the bundle across his back and drew his hood back up. He looked nothing like a

white-haired gleeman; he was just another poor traveler. “Let’s go. We’ve wasted too much time already.”

Mat looked out at the square. None of the sparse scattering of people gave them a second look, if they looked at all. He still nervously waited for a cry of “Darkfriend!” that would turn these ordinary people into an angry, frightened mob. He scanned the area again— nothing but people about their daily business— and when he brought them back, a fade was halfway across the square.

He didn’t see where it had come from, but he could tell where it was headed: straight at the three of them. Its easy gait was the slow, deadly stride of a predator with its prey in sight. The square began to empty out. *They must be needed elsewhere.* Mat was pretty sure he was more needed in just about every elsewhere in the world, but his feet felt frozen in place.

“Don’t look at its face,” Thom said. His voice shook and cracked. “Don’t look at its bloody face!”

Mat had the dagger out now. His hand trembled, and he could hear the beat of his heart and the snarl in his throat.

“Why are we just standing here?” al’ Thor said. “We have to run. Get away.” But his feet didn’t move any more than Mat’s did.

“Think you can outrun it, boy?” Thom’s voice was hoarse. Dry. He muttered some words to himself that Mat couldn’t make out. Then he said, “Never should have gotten mixed up with you boys. Never. It’s what I get for— ” He shrugged the bundled gleeman’s cloak off of his back and shoved it into al’ Thor’s arms. “Take care of that. When I say run, you run. Don’t stop until you get to Caemlyn. The Queen’s Blessing. It’s an inn. Remember that, in case... Just remember it.”

“What?” al’ Thor said. The myrddraal was not twenty paces away now.

“Just remember it!” Thom said. “The Queen’s Blessing. Now. RUN!”

He gave them a push, one hand on the shoulder of each of them, to get them started, and the two of them were off in a lurching run.

“RUN!” Thom sprang into motion, too, with a long, wordless roar. Not after them, but toward the halfman. With a gleeman’s flourish he waved his hands and pulled daggers from nowhere. Al’ Thor slowed for a second, but Mat pushed him along. They both kept an eye on the gleeman, though.

The fade’s leisurely pace faltered in the face of Thom’s ridiculous charge. Its hand swept toward the hilt of the black sword hanging at its waist, but the gleeman’s long legs covered the distance between them quickly. Thom crashed into the fade before its blade was half drawn, and both went down in a heap. The few people still in the square fled.

“Run!” A blinding blue flash filled the square. Thom began to scream, an incoherent howl of pain, but even in the middle of that he managed a single word. “*RUN!*”

The boys obeyed. The gleeman’s screams chased them out of the square.

Fleeing the square, Mat and al’ Thor saw shopkeepers abandon their goods and shutters bang down over storefronts. Frightened faces appeared in the windows of houses and then vanished. People in the streets knocked each other down as they scrambled to get away from the sound of Thom’s scream—the sound of the fade killing Thom. Mat gnashed his teeth and ran.

The gates were in sight, and they were open. Mat could see two gatekeepers in steel caps and mail tunics, fingering their halberds as they looked out over the roiling city. Mat and al’ Thor were in plain sight, but so were scores of other people running through the gates. No one would be able to say which way they’d gone, or that they’d even been through.

They ran until they were alone and the town and the White Bridge were far out of sight behind them. Al’ Thor fell to his knees in front of Mat, breathing raggedly in great gulps. Sweat and dust streaked his face, and he looked ready to collapse.

“Come on,” Mat said. “Come on. We have to keep going.”

“Thom,” al’ Thor said. He tightened his arms around the bundle of the gleeman’s old cloak.

“He’s dead. You saw. You heard. He’s dead, al’ Thor, and we’ll bloody well be the same if we don’t keep moving.”

“You think everyone’s dead. Egwene, Perrin, all of them. And it’s like you don’t even care. Perrin is your mate, not mine. But you’re ready to give up on him, on everything. I’m not. The halfmen are still hunting them, still searching for them at The Wayfarer’s Rest and who knows where else. I say that means they’re alive. I’m not giving up.”

“Then don’t.” Mat dropped to his knees in the dust beside him. “Look, maybe they’re dead. Maybe they ain’t. But Thom is gone, and the same things that ended him will end us if they can. We don’t go now, we *are* giving up. These roads ain’t safe. Don’t know who’s walking them.”

Al’ Thor nodded slowly. Mat checked the road behind them— still empty. So was the road ahead. *Caemlyn. The Queen’s Blessing.* He stood and helped pull al’ Thor to his feet.

“Let’s go,” said al’ Thor, and they started down the road toward Caemlyn.

Meetings on the Road to Whitebridge

Nynaeve felt the skin tearing, heard the knee pop. It was not as loud as she expected. It never was.

She pulled the other leg clean, then used her thumbs to rip the skin apart at the groin. This left a natural handle right above the tail, which she used to pull the rabbit's skin off clear to his neck. She popped the forepaws through, then cut the head off and threw it aside. *Some crow eats well today.*

Nynaeve gutted the rabbit with a few quick slices of her knife, stood up, and started back toward the Aes Sedai and her valet. They would likely have eaten and broken camp by the time she returned, but she refused to take their food, even if it made her morning a little longer. Her pa had learned her hard on hunting and trapping, and her ma on cooking, and both on not taking charity. She'd be ashes scattered through four kingdoms before she wasted that learning.

When she got to camp, her two companions were with the horses, speaking quietly and checking their packs. Her things were still by the fire, which they had left burning so she could cook her breakfast. She cut the rabbit up into five pieces— the four limbs and the saddle— and stuck them on the ends of the skewers she had found before checking the snares. *Two dozen snares and one catch, and lucky for that.* She put them in the fire and turned to pack up.

“You'll burn the outsides like that.” She hadn't noticed the warder slide in behind her. He was good at not being noticed.

“Cook them quick,” Nynaeve said, keeping her head down as she brushed past him and started packing. “Eat while we ride. Fast. Easy. You can slow roast me some tender game when we have the children back.”

“It would be faster and easier to share food.”

“I do alright,” she said. “And I’ll not be beholden to her, or to you. Ask around the village. I beg no favors and take no aid. You won’t be the one to change that, warder, whatever other tricks you know.”

She took her pack and bedroll over to the horses and tied them behind Clover’s saddle. She went back and took her rabbit out of the fire and off the skewers, wrapping the meat in one of the rags she’d cut from an old wool dress that had proved ill-suited to horseback riding. Putting the rabbit in a pocket inside her cloak, she mounted Clover and pulled alongside the Aes Sedai, who already sat a horse. The two of them left the campsite and returned to the road, setting off at a steady trot. Lan stayed behind to douse the last of the flames and bury the coals, and see to it they left as little sign of their passing as possible. He would catch them up easily enough.

This was the fifth day since Shadar Logoth. They had kept a hard pace— as hard as the one they had kept when leaving Baerlon, if not harder. The sun hadn’t cleared the horizon when they set out, and it would be out of sight to the west before they stopped. They spent the whole time on the road, caring more for speed than stealth. Moiraine and Lan would take no chance that whatever boat had taken the boys on was slow, or stopping at night, or otherwise likely to give them any time to spare in their pursuit. Nynaeve was inclined to agree.

Like the four days prior, this one passed largely in silence. It was not just that the three of them said little. The land itself was quiet. The wind moaned in the trees, but all else was still. At first the stillness was restful after the madness of Shadar Logoth. Even before Shadar Logoth. She hadn’t known a moment’s peace since Winternight. She thought the quiet was nice.

She was wrong.

What seemed at first to be freedom from one kind of madness was in fact just a madness of a different sort. It was apprehension and dread rather than violence and danger. Hour by hour, the silence grew heavier, until by the end of the first day it was a leaden blanket smothering her.

The Aes Sedai and warder liked it no better than did Nynaeve. It did not show as plainly on their faces as she guessed it did on hers, but she saw hints in their small movements. Beneath their calm surfaces they wound tighter and tighter, like clock springs being forced to the breaking point.

Moiraine paused occasionally and cocked her head, as if listening to a voice only she could hear. Nynaeve followed suit, but heard nothing but silence, no matter how she strained. *Why can't I hear the wind anymore?* Whatever that secret voice said put a tiny crease on Moiraine's forehead. She would not have marked it on anyone else, but on the Aes Sedai's calm face it screamed for attention like a babe in a beehive.

Nynaeve hadn't seen the warder's stony expression change once all day, but he did not seem calm or composed to her. The way he looked and looked again at the leafless trees and the slow, wide water reminded her of a cornered rat, trying to guess which direction death would come from. For all his looking, he found no traps or ambushes that first day, and had found none since. That did not put Nynaeve at ease, though. It only made it feel that much more likely that this day, this hour, would be ill fated and ill met.

Nynaeve wondered more than once if she could break the dread of the silence just by talking, but she let the quiet lie. She didn't like the Aes Sedai or the warder, and she had never been good at making conversation with people she didn't like. For true, she was not much better at it with those she did like. But idle chat with those she'd rather not see, much less talk to, was Nynaeve's idea of torture. She never knew what to say, and hated listening to the foolish thoughts others saw fit to give voice to. So, as dreadful as the silence was, she held her tongue.

She held it till around noon of the second day, when the warder returned from a scouting run. After whispering some words in the Aes Sedai's ear,

he settled in between Moiraine at the head and Nynaeve trailing behind. It was as if seeing him speaking to Moiraine, though she couldn't hear it, whetted Nynaeve's appetite for conversation, for sound.

"You wear this silence poorly," she said when he turned back toward her, scanning the land for danger. "What is it has you so on edge? What is it running an itch up my back that I can't reach no matter how I twist?"

"Nothing," Lan said, facing front again. After a moment's silence, he went on without looking back. "You should return to your Two Rivers, Wisdom. Turn back when we reach Whitebridge and the Caemlyn Road. The way forward is dangerous, but nothing will try to stop you going back."

"Then it's *not* nothing."

"I fear she is part of this now, Lan," Moiraine said from ahead, turning to face them over her shoulder. "We cannot know the Pattern, but I think the Wheel has woven the three of us together, along with the children and the gleeman. Offer her your counsel, but I do not think she will heed you."

Nynaeve glared at the back of the Aes Sedai's head when she turned back around. *I'll make my own decisions, woman. Neither the Wheel nor your manipulations will set my path.*

"It is the Dark One, Wisdom," the Aes Sedai said, her back still to Nynaeve. "I would stake a heavy purse on it. Its forces gather. They venture south, attacking lands they have not seen in generations. They test our readiness, the mettle of our defenses. Something is coming. The Dark One's fingers tickle the world again. This is not the stillness of peace. It is the stillness of death."

Nynaeve hunched her shoulders. She almost wished she had left that awful silence undisturbed.

So it had been those first four days. Silence, interrupted by brief exchanges that tended to put Nynaeve even less at ease, followed by more silence. Just now the quiet was not quite so suffocating, as she could hear herself

chewing on her breakfast of burnt rabbit. But soon her meal would be done, and she would be choking on the silence again.

Nynaeve was thinking to herself, about silence and tension and rabbit meat, when she almost ran up the back of the warder's horse. He had stopped and was standing in his stirrups. She waited for him to start again, but he didn't move.

"Is there a reason we—" she started.

"Shadowspawn," he said, drawing his sword. He turned off the road and to the right, his horse breaking into a canter. "Moiraine! I'll be—"

Lan's black stallion came to a stop and reared. Another black horse emerged from the heavier woods at a gallop and crashed down on the warder. On its back sat a hooded figure in a black cloak. A cloak that didn't stir, for all that the wind blew and its mount moved. The fade had a sword, too, but the blade was a dull black against the silver gleam of the warder's steel.

The fade brought its sword down hard on Lan as their horses came together. The warder deflected the blow easily, a bright blue spark flying where their two blades met.

"You attack alone?" Lan said, turning to face his attacker. "Foolish, Eyeless. We have seen worse than you this moon."

The fade let out a roar— or was it a scream?— as it turned around and kicked its horse forward to meet the warder.

"Come, Wisdom," Moiraine said. "Let us keep you moving and away from the danger. Lan can handle himself. The better if he is not having to think of your safety while he is fighting."

It felt craven to leave, but the Aes Sedai was right. Nynaeve could be nothing there but a liability. She would be a hostage without even being captured.

They set off at a quick canter, and were soon in a full-out gallop. They had been going at that pace for maybe twenty minutes when they topped a small hill and saw another rider in the road. It was still a good hundred spans away, but there was no mistaking the figure it cut as it galloped toward them. *Fade*.

The two women came to a stop and Moiraine turned to her.

“Wisdom, take cover in the woods. I will draw this halfman away. I will need to use the Power to fight, which will attract any others that might be around. You will be safer here. I will be back when I can, and Lan will be along as soon as he is able. Stay safe, Wisdom.”

With that, she set off at a gallop to confront the black rider. Whatever else she was, the Aes Sedai was no coward. The fade let out a strangled battle cry as the two approached each other, and Nynaeve saw the road between the adversaries explode in a cloud of earth and rock and dust that quickly hid them from her view. Feeling useless, she retreated to the woods. She went far enough in to be invisible from the road but no further, hoping to at least hear how the fight went, if she could not watch it.

She remained mounted as she listened, trying to interpret what she heard. The sound of earth exploding was easy enough to mark, as were the fade’s cries. She thought she recognized the sound of conjured lightning, but some noises were a mystery to her. Some sounded like metal meeting metal, though she knew of no blade that Moiraine carried. Some sounded like a cross between a howling wind and a retching drunk. As the minutes passed, all of the sounds grew fainter. True to her word, the Aes Sedai was drawing the fade away. It could not have been more than five or ten minutes before the battle was out of earshot.

After half an hour, Nynaeve climbed out of her saddle and pulled a little farther into the wood, finding some space to sit down and rest until either Lan or Moiraine returned. She tried not to worry what would happen if neither did. That was out of her control. Besides, it seemed clear that she

would make her way to Whitebridge at least and try to figure her next move.

Such considerations became moot soon enough when she heard a horse on the road, walking with a shuffling gait that sounded almost leisurely. Nynaeve peeked through the trees, waiting for horse and rider to come into view. Somehow her heart seemed to be stopped and pounding in her ears all at once. It felt like an hour before she saw the nose of the horse appear, though she knew it could not have been more than a minute. She was out from her hiding place before she even saw the rider, recognizing the warder's stallion straight away by his bit and bridle.

When she did see Lan, Nynaeve's breath caught. He was bent over, arms wrapped loosely around the stallion's neck, barely staying in his saddle. When she came closer, she saw that he had wound the reins around his arms to keep him from falling to the ground. His left arm was cut and bleeding. He had blood on his face, too, but she couldn't see where that had come from.

"Lan!" she said. "Here!"

He didn't even lift his head. He didn't react to her at all. She ran up, grabbed the stallion's bridle, and led him back to her hiding place in the trees. She freed the warder's arms from the reins and pulled him out of his saddle. He came down heavy and almost knocked her over. She spread her blanket roll out on the ground and dragged him to it. He never opened his eyes.

The cut on his arm wasn't as bad as it looked, but he had another one above his right temple and a more serious gash under his ribcage on the right side. Nynaeve took a rag and tied it tight below his left underarm to slow the bleeding. She would need hot water to clean the wounds and prepare her treatments, so she cleared a small patch of ground for a fire bed, then went and collected firewood—tinder, kindling, and fuelwood. She took out her flint and soon had a strong blaze going. She filled her small kettle with water from her skin, then set it to boil.

While the water heated, she took some herbs out of her saddlebag—marigold, comfrey root, feverbane, geranium. *It's a good thing I did not take the danger of the outlands too lightly in my packing.* She threw the marigold into the warming water; it would help clean the wounds. She found a soft cotton rag in her things and took it out to help with the cleaning. She would have preferred some very fine leather or sheepskin, but she had none, and the cotton at least was soft and clean.

She checked on the water, which was warm but not yet hot. She returned to Lan and began getting him ready. She pulled off his cloak and coat as gently as she could. It would have been easier to cut them off, but winter had not released its hold on the land or skies, and he would need them tomorrow and after. His shirt she opened with three slices of her hunting knife. He had a strong chest and shoulders, all sinew and muscle, and covered in scars. She ran her fingers over his skin. Other than the wound on his side, which was red and hot to the touch, he didn't seem to have any serious inflammation. The wound would be trouble, though. For it to be so warm so soon might mean poison.

The water was boiling, so she dipped the cloth in and set about cleaning all of his wounds, starting with one in his side. When they were as clean as she could manage, she sprinkled them with dried geranium leaves and root to help stop the bleeding. She made a poultice of the comfrey root and marigold-infused water and packed it into the gash on his side. There was no good place for a tourniquet for that wound, so it would need stitches.

Nynaeve took out a needle and thread, and a few of her cleaner rags. She threw the rags in the boiling water to get them as clean as she could manage before using them as bandages. She threaded the needle while the rags were boiling, then dipped it in the water before setting to the wound. It took five stitches to close. Lan came to while she made the second one.

“Wisdom,” he said. She waited for him to say more, to ask what was happening, but he was silent for a moment before closing his eyes.

“Lan, stay with me,” she said, putting her hand behind his head. “Are you there?”

“Wisdom,” he said again. “The halfman fell, though I fear it struck me before doing so.”

“Yes, I can see that,” she said softly. “You will be alright. I just need you to be strong while I close your wound. You’ve suffered a nasty gash on your right side.”

He nodded and closed his eyes again. “Strong,” he said.

She sighed and finished the stitches. Then she took the hot, wet rags and tied them around his arm and head. She took the tourniquet from his arm, where the bleeding had slowed and the bandage would suffice.

Nynaeve sat down, feeling weary, and looked at her patient. His stony face did not look much softer when he slept. Maybe a touch.

“Lan,” she said. He didn’t stir. “Lan.”

His eyes fluttered but they did not open. Then his back arched and he went into a fit. His arms started quivering and his head snapped back.

“No. No!”

She grabbed the nearest stick and jammed it between his teeth to keep him from biting himself. He began twitching his head to the right, then thrashing back and forth. Nynaeve could do nothing but wait it out, hope it passed, and see how he was after. She held his hand and watched as the minutes passed. When he finally stopped, he lay limp and unmoving. She put her ear to his chest, then his mouth.

“No!” Nynaeve felt the rage building that came most anytime someone took very ill. She slapped her hand against his cheek a few times. “Come on, stay with me, you arrogant outlander ass. Lan!” She slapped him a little harder.

“That damned woman is going to come back at some point, and she’ll not find I’ve let you die. Come on!”

Nynaeve felt her eyes burning. She slapped the warder’s chest. “Up!” She slapped him again. “Up!” When her hand came down a third time, he coughed and took some deep, choking breaths. She laughed through her own gasps and put her forehead to his. “That’s right, up with you,” she said, bringing her head back up.

He opened his eyes. Blue ice. *They’re not so cold.* Nynaeve looked away then, checking on his wound. It was still warm, but it was already cooling.

“Hello, Wisdom.” He lifted his head to look at her.

“Hello, warder. You’ll have to try harder if you want to die while I’m around.”

“You’ve yet to see me try at all.”

She emptied the kettle and filled it with some clean water to make a tea of the feverbane. “It’s a fool who comes so close to death without even trying.”

“Where is Moiraine?” he asked as he lay back down. “How did I come to be here, with you?”

“Moiraine is off fighting another halfman. Your horse brought you here, unconscious.” She looked over at the black stallion. “He’s really quite the magnificent beast, isn’t he?”

“He is called Mandarb,” Lan said. He was slurring his words a bit. He still needed rest. “It means ‘blade’ in the Old Tongue. Moiraine Sedai, her horse is Aldieb— ‘west wind.’ Yes, good horses.”

“Yes, well, it wouldn’t have mattered if he were the grandest horse a man had ever known if I hadn’t been concealed in these trees beside the road.

You would have died, for true, and proven yourself the bigger fool for not having even tried. Count yourself lucky, warder.”

“Another halfman? That explains... Well, thank you for your aid, Wisdom. I am in your debt.”

“This is what I do.” She turned her attention to the water, which was now boiling. She made the tea and handed it to Lan. “This will help with the fever, which is already breaking, and should bring a restful sleep. Let your body take care of itself. Your Aes Sedai will return soon enough.”

He sat up to drink, then lay back down. “Thank you, Wisdom.”

He was asleep within a few minutes, more from exhaustion than the tea. Nynaeve started cleaning up her things. She left the kettle out, along with some herbs, but the rest she put away.

She put her hand back on the warder’s chest. His heartbeat was strong, and the skin was closer to normal than to the fiery hot it had been just a few minutes prior.

So many scars.

She pulled Lan’s blanket down from his stallion and covered him so he wouldn’t catch cold. Of course, that left her without a blanket, since he was on top of hers. She got some more wood for the fire, then wrapped herself in the warder’s chameleon cloak and sat down to warm herself by the flames. The cloak smelled good, like smoke and rain and forest all at once. She leaned forward and put her chin on her knees.

It had been more than an hour since Moiraine had raced off to face the halfman. She wouldn’t worry until Lan woke up and she could gauge whether he could ride, and how hard. Until then, she could do nothing but wait.

Nynaeve closed her eyes and waited.

Among the Traveling People

Every bite Perrin took made him want to sick up, but he kept eating. He was starving, and he knew his disgust was with himself and not the rabbit and tubers Elyas had roasted last night that now served as lunch for all of them. All the same, he fought the urge to gag with every mouthful.

He swallowed and looked up from his food just in time to see a wolf—Hopper—appear on the right, just where Perrin knew he would. A shiver crept from his wrists up his arms and between his shoulder blades.

Perrin scratched at his forearms, digging his fingernails deep enough to hurt. He was glad to feel anything that had nothing to do with the wolves. This thing with the wolves... *Whatever Elyas says, this must be the Dark One in my veins, or at least some shadow of the Power.* In the two and a half days since waking up with a wolf at his throat, it had become more and more obvious to Perrin that Elyas was right about him, that he did have some connection with the wolves—either that or he had gone plumb mad. Because he knew how close they were, which direction they were moving, even how they were feeling. The knowledge felt dirty and wrong, but he knew all the same.

One thing Perrin had not done was talk to the wolves. This was not for lack of opportunity. Even now, he could feel Dapple pressing in at the edges of his mind, probing, trying to communicate. Perrin refused. Whatever was inside him, he would not end up like Elyas—a man he had called mad just two days before. *Inside me. Is this it? Is this why the Dark One has been chasing us? Something about me and the wolves?*

Perrin took another bite of rabbit and fought back the urge to gag.

“It’s your turn on Bela.” Egwene had already shouldered her pack, and Elyas was ranging ahead.

Perrin wrapped up what was left of his food, glad for a reason to stop eating. His hunger would have to wait.

Perrin watched Hopper lope away as he mounted Bela. With all the wolves out of sight, he tried to put them out of his mind, as well, his thoughts turning to home and family. He wondered how Ma and Da were taking his absence. He knew that, at that moment, leaving with no more goodbye than a note had been the right choice. But now, some weeks removed, he really wished he had had the chance to talk to them, to kiss Ma and his sisters before he left, even to hug old Master Luhhan.

Perrin thought of the last time he’d talked with Master Luhhan, of the way Master Luhhan had laughed. That laugh had made it seem like they’d finally see the end of this winter, like this Bel Tine would be as fine as any Perrin had ever seen. Now that laughter, a hollow echo in his mind, sounded small, sad, pitiful.

Master Luhhan left, and that’s when Mat showed up, and this whole thing had started for true. *How is Mat, then? Where is he? Are he and Rand together? Are they getting on?* Rand was a queer fish, but Perrin liked him well enough. Even if he was odd, Perrin had always thought he seemed true. Genuine, like. And Mat, well, he could rub people the wrong way, but he could also make laundry seem fun. *Well, usually by finding a way to dodge it.* Perrin smiled. He missed Mat.

Bela pulled up short. Perrin, lost in his thoughts, looked up to see three mastiffs burst from the cover of a stand of trees up ahead. They were broad-muzzled dogs, a hair shorter than the wolves but heavier. They stopped no more than thirty feet from Perrin and the rest, teeth bared in loud, rumbling snarls. They looked set on killing, but Perrin hoped they just wanted to scare the humans away. It seemed a faint hope, though, which meant

fighting. He had no smooth or swift way to get down from Bela and take his axe in hand. This was going to be messy.

Bela whinnied and stepped nervously. She was already on edge from being around the wolves. She was none too pleased with these new beasts.

Egwene, at Perrin's right, already had her sling whirling around her head. *Smart. A stone in the ribs will send all but the worst dogs running.* Perrin almost had his hand around the axe handle when Elyas waved a hand at him and Egwene.

"Hsst," he said, not taking his eyes from the dogs. "None of that now."

Perrin gave him a puzzled frown and drew his hand back. Egwene let her sling slow until it fell to her side, but she kept a wary eye trained on the dogs.

The mastiffs' hackles stood stiff. Their ears were laid back and their growls fair shook the ground beneath them. Elyas raised one finger shoulder high and gave a long, shrill whistle that rose higher and higher and seemed to last forever. The dogs cut their growls off raggedly. With their eyes fixed on Elyas's finger, they stepped back, whining and turning their heads to and fro.

Elyas lowered his hand slowly, and the pitch of his whistle along with it. The dogs followed with their eyes until they lay flat on the ground, tongues lolling from their mouths and tails wagging.

"See," Elyas said, walking to the dogs, "there's no need for weapons." The mastiffs licked his hands, and he scratched their heads and rubbed their ears. "They look meaner than they are. They just meant to frighten us off. They wouldn't have bitten less we aimed to go into the trees. This would've made a good spot to camp, but that's no option now. Tuatha'an are here now. Best move. We can make the next thicket before full dark."

Perrin and Egwene looked at each other with open mouths. Perrin clicked his jaw shut and turned to Elyas. "Tootha...?"

Elyas turned back to them. “Tuatha’ an.” His eyebrow shot up. “The Traveling People.” Perrin and Egwene stared back blankly. Finally he said, “Tinkers.”

“Tinkers?!” Perrin exclaimed.

“Tinkers,” Egwene said, looking into the trees. “I’ve always wanted to see the Tinkers. They camp across the river from Taren Ferry sometimes, but they don’t come down into the Two Rivers, as far as I know.”

“We wouldn’t have them,” Perrin said. “I mean, the Council and the Women’s Circle. Everyone says, you know, how they’ll steal you blind, the Tinkers. But maybe— well, maybe we should head on. We don’t want Bela stolen, and... well, we ain’t got much else, but the Tinkers might take that, too. If you believe the stories.”

“They *do* say Tinkers will steal anything,” Egwene said.

“Pffft,” said Elyas. “Like babies? Kidnap children, and all that?” He spat, and Egwene blushed. Perrin hung his head a bit. “There’s plenty I don’t like about Tinkers, but they don’t steal any more than most folks. A good bit less than some I know.”

Back home, Mistress Luhhan had a Tinker-mended pot. She claimed it was better than new, which ain’t please Master Luhhan none, but it made Perrin curious as to how they did it.

“It’ll be getting dark soon,” he said. “We might should just camp here, don’t you think? If they’ll have us?”

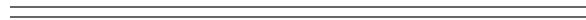
Perrin and Egwene both looked at Elyas, but the man had his chin in his chest and was muttering to himself, still scratching one of the dogs behind his ear. Finally he shook his head and looked up. He had a reluctance to him, something in the set of his shoulders and the tightness of his mouth.

“Alright,” he said. “May as well. Just pay no mind to whatever they say. Lot of foolishness. Most times the Traveling People do things any which

way, but there's times they set great store by formality, so you just do what I do." He paused. "And you two... you keep your secrets, yeah? World don't need to know everything."

Elyas stood up and led the way into the trees. The dogs trailed along beside them, wagging their tails. The wolves were a good ways out. They wouldn't enter the wood. They weren't afraid of the dogs, as Perrin had to admit that he had been. The dogs, who had given up freedom to sleep by a fire, inspired nothing but contempt from the wolves. *It's the people the wolves are avoiding.*

Elyas walked surely, as if he knew the way, and near the center of the stand the Tinkers' wagons appeared, scattered among the oak and ash. And there — some dancing, some working, the children running about— were the Traveling People. The Tinkers.



Like anyone from Emond's Field— or anywhere else, probably— Egwene had heard a good deal about the Tinkers, and she had a picture in her mind of what a Tinker camp would look like. The camp they saw now was both like and unlike that picture. It was, as she imagined, a collection of wagons that were small houses on wheels. And they were certainly varied in color, as they were famous for. But Egwene had always imagined Tinker wagons as garish and clashing, a mishmash of reds and yellows and purples and greens. Instead, even though each wagon seemed to be a different hue, and each one as bright as the one before, the wagons somehow blended in with one another and the surrounding woods like some impossibly complex harmony. The clothes were just as colorful, and the Tinkers looked like butterflies in a field of wildflowers as they went about the everyday work of cooking, sewing, tending children, mending harness.

Four or five men in different places around the camp played fiddles and flutes, and a few people danced. For a moment, Egwene got lost in

watching the dancers. She stopped seeing their bodies and saw only the colors, swimming in patterns, like a cipher she couldn't quite crack. Children ran playing among the cookfires with dogs just like the mastiffs from the edge of the wood. These showed no signs of growling, though, as children tugged at their ears and tails and climbed on their backs.

The music stopped, suddenly and clumsily. All the Tinkers were looking at the newcomers. Even the children and dogs stood still and watched. Egwene probably should have felt awkward and self-conscious, but she was mostly just excited to see other people. The days since Shadar Logoth had been lonely, even though she was not alone. Seeing Perrin just reminded her of all the people they were separated from, particularly Rand and Moiraine Sedai. Every day the fear that they might be dead grew stronger, until now hope felt like a childish delusion. And Elyas, well he was hardly one to make a body feel less lonely. So the sight of other people, new people, even if they stared at her in silence, probably in judgment, well, it was enough to put dragonflies in her belly and a smile on her face.

The silence stretched for a long moment, then a wiry, grey-haired man stepped forward and bowed to Elyas, both hands pressed to his chest. "You are welcome to our fires," he said. "Do you know the song?"

Elyas bowed in the same way. "Your welcome warms my spirit, Mahdi, as your fires warm the flesh, but I do not know the song."

"Then we seek still," said the grey-haired man. "As it was, so shall it be— if we but remember, seek, and find." He swept an arm toward the fires with a smile, and his voice took on a cheerful lightness. "The meal is almost ready. Join us, please."

A fiddler started playing, and in a moment the camp was as it had been when they had arrived— filled with music and dancing and laughing, running children. Everyone in the camp went back to what they had been doing. *It's as though we're old friends, expected and welcome.* The grey-haired man hesitated, though.

“Your... other friends,” he said, looking at Elyas. “They will stay away? You know how they frighten the poor dogs.”

“I do,” Elyas said with a shake of his head. “And you should know by now that they will, Raen.”

The other man spread his hands and shrugged with a grin, then turned to lead them into camp. Egwene moved closer to Elyas.

“You two are friends?” she asked.

“We know each other,” Elyas said.

“From where?” said Perrin.

Elyas grunted. “They travel a lot. I travel a lot. We’ve crossed paths before. I may not spend much time around people these days, but you’ll find I know a great many of them.”

They reached the grey-haired man’s fire, then. His wagon was in the middle of the camp, and a plump woman— grey like the man but with cheeks as smooth as a baby’s— stood in the doorway at the top of the steps, straightening the shawl on her shoulders. When she saw the newcomers, she broke out in a smile that seemed welcoming and well practiced. She looked very different, but something about her reminded Egwene of Mama.

“Elyas,” she said as she walked down the stairs, “somehow I am never surprised to see you. What new friends do you bring to our fires?” Her words didn’t have the air of ritual that the grey-haired man’s had, but they did seem a bit formal, a bit stiff.

“Ila,” Elyas said with another bow, “you and Raen are as generous and welcoming as ever. These two are Perrin and Egwene, from out past Baerlon. We travel together for the moment.”

Ila clasped Perrin’s hands in her own, then Egwene’s, with much more warmth than she had shown Elyas.

“Why, you lovely child,” she said to Egwene, cupping her chin and smiling. “Chilled to the bone, I wouldn’t wonder. You sit close to the fire, girl. All of you, sit. Supper is nigh ready.”

Ila took spoons and pottery bowls from a red chest on the side of the wagon and served them each from the kettle of thick vegetable stew hanging over the fire, along with thick slices of her crusty bread.

“Excuse me,” Perrin said to the grey-haired man as Ila handed out the food. “Is your name Raen or Mahdi? Elyas called you both.”

The man smiled. “Raen is my name. Mahdi is my title. It means Seeker.”

“We seek the song, child,” Ila said. “They call us the Traveling People. This is why we travel.”

“What song?” Egwene asked. She scooped some stew with her bread and took a greedy bite. It was delicious, flavored with spices Egwene was sure she’d never tasted before.

“If we knew that,” said Raen, “I am sure we would have found it long ago. It is an old song. We lost it. We lost it in the Breaking.”

“If you don’t know the song, how will you know if you find it?” asked Perrin.

“We will know,” Raen said. “We will know, and we will sing it. And when we do, what was broken will be whole again.”

“But in the meantime,” said someone behind Egwene, “we have many songs to warm the spirit.”

Egwene turned to find a slender young man dressed in standard Tinker garb — a green-striped shirt with loud orange pants— strolling up to the fire. He gave Raen a hug and Ila a kiss, and ran a cool eye over Elyas, Perrin, and Egwene. He looked to be of an age with Egwene, maybe a bit older. He was handsome— almost as tall as Rand, with short hair and long eyelashes, and

a slightly crooked nose— and moved as if he'd begin dancing with his next step. *He's beautiful, really.*

“Well, Aram,” Ila said with a smile, “why have you decided to eat with your old grandparents on this night, when you haven't done so in... how long, Baba?”

“Oh,” said Raen, “it must be weeks, at least.”

Ila glanced at Egwene as she bent to stir the kettle hanging over the cookfire.

Aram settled to an easy crouch across from Egwene, arms crossed on his knees and feet flat on the ground. “I am Aram,” he said. Egwene felt like he was looking only at her. “I have waited for the first rose of spring, and now I find it at my grandfather's fire.”

Perrin laughed, and Egwene shot him a look. The laughter stopped, and soon the smile it left was replaced by a look of confusion and disbelief. Egwene glared back. *Leave it be, Perrin. We'd best enjoy this while we can. We'll be on the cold, lonely road again soon enough.*

She turned back to Aram. “Your words are too kind. Thank you. Are you joining us?”

Perrin cut in before Aram could answer. “Those dogs of yours, they look as big as bears. I'm surprised you let the children play with them.”

Egwene scowled at Perrin. *Why is he doing this?*

Aram's sure smile slipped, but was back by the time he turned to answer Perrin. “They wouldn't harm you. They make a show to frighten away danger, and to warn us, but they are as bound to the Way as anyone in camp.”

“The ‘Way’?” Egwene said. “What is that?”

“The Way of the Leaf,” said Raen. He looked at her expectantly, but she didn’t know what she was meant to say next. When he started again, he seemed to be talking to himself as much as to them. “Across Asur, people know all manner of myth and slander about the Tuatha’an, but no one knows even the most basic...” He sighed, exasperated.

“The leaf lives its appointed time,” Ila said, waving at the trees with a smile, “and does not struggle against the wind that carries it away. The leaf does no harm, and finally falls to nourish new leaves. This is the Way of the Leaf.”

“So it should be with all men,” said Aram. He looked at Egwene. “And women.”

Egwene had to look off, a flush rising in her cheeks. She peeked at Perrin, just to look at something, and he rolled his eyes.

“But what does that mean?” he said. Aram gave him an irritated glance, but it was Raen who answered.

“It means that no man should harm another. Not for any reason, not ever.” Raen looked at Elyas. “There is no excuse for violence. None whatsoever.”

“What if somebody attacks you?” Perrin said. “What if somebody hits you, or tries to rob you, or kill you?”

Raen sighed, the sigh of a patient father waiting for his child to see what was so clear to him. “If a man hit me, I would ask him why he wanted to do such a thing. If he still wanted to hit me, I would run away, as I would if he wanted to rob or kill me. Much better that I let him take what he wanted, even my life, than that I should do violence. And I would hope that he was not harmed too greatly.”

“Harmed too— ? But you said you wouldn’t hurt him.”

“And I would not,” Raen said. “But violence harms the one who does it as much as the one who receives it. Say you cut down a tree with that axe you

carry. Do you think the axe escapes unharmed? Wood is soft compared to steel, but even the sharpest steel dulls as it chops, and the sap of the tree will rust and pit it. The mighty axe does violence to the helpless tree, and is harmed by it. So it is with us, though the harm is in the spirit.”

“But— ”

“Enough.” Elyas cut Perrin off with a growl. “Raen, this is the nonsense that gets you in trouble almost everywhere you go. I didn’t bring these two here for you to try to convert like some village younglings. Leave off.”

“You mean leave them to you,” Ila said before taking a bite of stew-soaked bread. “Will you teach them your way, to kill or die? Will you lead them to the fate you seek for yourself, a lonely death with only the ravens and your — your friends to squabble over your body?”

“Be at peace, Ila,” Raen said, again sounding patient. “He has been welcomed to our fire, my wife.”

Ila stopped, but she made no apology. Raen turned back to Elyas. “My old friend, you know that we seek no trouble. We do no more than answer questions for those who are curious about our ways, younglings or no. And if anyone wants to join us, why should we not let them?”

“See, this is why the bigger towns won’t even let you camp nearby. They’ve heard too many farm wives crying after their sons and daughters have run off with the Tinkers. Cities have their own smiths and artisans to mend their things. They have no use for you, or the Way of the Leaf.”

“I would not know what the cities need or do not.” Raen’s voice stayed even and calm. Egwene tried to imagine Papa staying so level with Master Buie on one of his rants and almost laughed. “They are home to too many violent men. Besides, I doubt the song will be found in a city. As for the other, no one would run off with the Tuatha’an if they weren’t sickened by the violence in the cities and the towns, in the lives and hearts of the people of the Ten Kingdoms.”

“I don’t mean to offend you, Seeker,” Perrin said slowly, “but... well, look, I don’t chase violence. I don’t think I’ve even wrestled anybody in years, save for feastday games sometimes. But if somebody hit me, I’d hit him back. If I didn’t, he’d think he could hit me whenever he wanted. Some folk think they can go around bullying anybody weaker than they are, and they will if you let them.”

“Some people,” Aram said, “can never overcome their baser instincts.”

Perrin’s hands closed up. Egwene couldn’t remember ever seeing Perrin angry. “I think it’s interesting,” she said, hoping to cut this conflict off, “hearing how other people live. So different from our village.”

Aram smiled at her. “I can tell you all about how we live. Let me show you our camp.” He stood and crossed the circle, holding a hand out to Egwene. “There will be dancing.”

She set her empty bowl down and took his hand, smiling as she stood.

“But you haven’t eaten, Aram,” Ila said.

“I’ll eat with mother,” Aram said.

“Thank you so much for the delicious stew,” Egwene said over her shoulder as Aram led her away by the hand. She lost sight of the campfire before she could catch Perrin’s eye.

Aram was nearly running through the trees, and Egwene laughed as she tried to keep up.

“My parents’ fire is just through here,” he said, speaking loudly enough for her to hear him, but not turning his head. And sure enough, they came upon another fire in a clearing. A man and a woman sat eating in front of a fire, the woman resting her head on the man’s shoulder between bites. They looked up when Egwene and Aram came into the clearing.

“I was wondering what was keeping you,” the man said, “but I should have known.”

“Of course,” the woman said, smiling. “Who would not be a little late for supper for a smile like that. Hello, dear. I am Aima, and this is Urien. We are Aram’s lucky parents.”

They sat down and Aima served dinner, a full portion for Aram and a smaller one for Egwene, who really wasn’t hungry after Ila’s stew. Aram and his family spent the meal telling her all about the last few villages the Tinkers had been to. That was fine with Egwene. She was not eager to lie to these friendly new people, but she knew also couldn’t tell strangers the truth about herself and Perrin.

As always, she found stories of outlanders fascinating— all the more so when told by other outlanders. The tales were by no means fantastic— how much that happens in small villages is ever fantastic?— but Egwene enjoyed them none the less for that. *I have enough of the fantastic in my real life right now.*

Aram spoke when he had something to say, and otherwise spent the entire conversation gazing at Egwene with a smile on his face. At least, that’s what he seemed to be doing whenever Egwene glanced his way. *He’s certainly not shy. No lack of confidence in this one.* She smiled at that. It was nice after spending so much time with Rand, who was a bit too sensitive. Being an outsider weighed heavily on Rand, but Aram was a Tinker— as much a race of outsiders as any, save the Aiel— and was at ease with it. *Of course, he’s not an outsider here among the Tinkers. Not like Rand back home.*

Dinner was pleasant, and it was fun to have a handsome stranger looking at her like that, but it was the dancing afterward that lit a fire inside Egwene. As the Tinker families finished their suppers, they gathered bit by bit back around Raen and Ila’s fire. Egwene supposed it was because Raen was Mahdi. There was already a small group there when she arrived with Aram

and his family. Ila gave her a big hug when she saw her, and kissed Aima and Urien, who was her son.

The music started with a boy tapping out a rhythm on a hand drum. Other musicians trickled in. Some, like one of the fiddlers, were even playing as they walked up; Egwene heard them well before she saw them. Soon the camp was alive with tunes the Tinkers had gathered from all over the world. Some songs were their own, of course— these were fast and rhythmic and had a smoky feel that was unlike anything Egwene had heard before. Some of the songs she knew from home, but they went by different names in the Tinker camp. “Three Girls in the Meadow” was “Pretty Maids Dancing,” and they said “The Wind from the North” was called “Hard Rain Falling” in some lands and “Berin’s Retreat” in others.

Egwene stood to dance almost as soon as the music started. She danced with Aram often, but also with others who were curious about the strangers. It didn’t matter who was across from her. Egwene found herself lost in the Tinkers’ songs. This music tugged at her feet and made her blood pound in rhythm to the drums. Even Perrin seldom sat down, and he was never one to jump at the chance to dance back home. Egwene was paired with him more than once, and she didn’t think he had ever danced so hard or so well in his life.

After a dozen fast songs, the music stopped for a moment and most people took a moment to sit and rest. With night hanging close around the camp, Aram’s cousin Dashei’s fingers tapped a slow rhythm on her drum that seemed to match the fires, which now burned low. One drum joined her, then another, until soon every drum in the camp kept the same low, insistent beat. The sound filled the wood. Everything else was silence. A girl in a red dress swayed into the light, loosening her shawl. Strings of beads hung in her hair, and she had kicked off her shoes. A flute began a soft, plaintive melody, and the girl danced a dance that Egwene would never have dreamt to see, a dance that more than made up for whatever heat the fires had lost. The girl’s outstretched arms spread her shawl behind her. Her hips moved like a sheet on the laundry line in an impossibly slow, strong wind. In waves and ripples. Her bare feet shuffled to the beat of the drums. The girl’s

dark eyes fastened on Perrin, and her smile was as slow as her dance. She turned in small circles, smiling over her shoulder at him.

Egwene laughed and clapped along with the drums. She had never seen Perrin so abashed. He ducked his head, trying in vain to hide from the dancing girl and the eyes of the others around the fire. It did little good, and Egwene could see plainly how red his face glowed.

A second girl joined the first. The fringe on their shawls shook in time to the drums and the slow rotation of their hips. Their movements were so fluid and effortless; Egwene couldn't take her eyes off them. Once she caught Aram looking at her, and once she saw Perrin edging his way off of the log and looking away from the fire, away from the girls. But mostly she watched the dancers. They didn't have anything like this in Emond's Field. Feastday dances on the Green didn't even come close. But the only feastdays she had been to were as a girl. Something about this music, this dancing, made her feel like a woman. Without thinking, her fingers started working the end of her hair into a braid, then taking it out, then braiding it again.

Now they were three dancers. They laughed as they moved, the beads in their hair clicking as they turned their heads with the rhythm. One of them seemed focused on Perrin. Egwene thought the girl enjoyed teasing him, which was fine by Egwene— especially after he had been so rude to Aram at dinner. Another of the girls walked up to Egwene and held out her hand.

“Come,” she said. “A girl should know how to dance.”

Egwene stood and a woman who was still sitting threw her a shawl and called for her to show her what she could do. Egwene laughed and started clapping along like the other dancers. They tried to keep it simple for her, starting with the most basic hip movement— lifting first one hip, then the other. The key was starting with her knees bent and her upper body locked and steady as the basic position, and always coming back to it. They didn't do that in Two Rivers dances. When she got the hang of hip lifts, they showed her hip twists, and then how to make her hips and belly roll. It took

her a while, but she had the basics down by the end of the night. She could even do most of it while on her toes, and could take some steps (though she found that pretty difficult). All the while, Aram looked at her hungrily, a half-smile pulling one corner of his mouth up. She was thinking about her hips, but she felt the pulse of her blood below and between them.

Perrin looked at her, too, but with shock and judgment, not desire. Egwene rolled her eyes and moved closer to him, trying to break through his embarrassment. *I'm not in Emond's Field anymore. I won't be trapped by narrow, downcountry morals, where most things are "wrong" or stay hidden.* Perrin didn't see it that way, though. He could hardly look at her.

Egwene didn't let it bother her that first night, nor on the days and nights that followed. Even when he said nothing, she could feel Perrin's disapproval. *What do his objections matter when like as not our friends are dead, with us soon to join them?* The fate of the others hung over her like the heaviest of storm clouds, filled with shadows and menace. She tried to occupy herself with the exercises Moiraine Sedai had taught her, and with getting to know these new people, and with helping around the camp when they stopped each night, in whatever way she could. At some moments, those days in the Tinker camp felt like a pleasant dream, but one that she always knew would turn into a nightmare soon enough.

She enjoyed spending time with Ila and Aima, and going on walks with Aram, listening to his tales of other lands. He gave her a string of blue beads that she took to wearing around her neck. She gave him a kiss, and he took that for a sign. She never let it get much farther than that, though, however much Aram wanted it to.

One night, coming back to Raen and Ila's after having dinner with Aram, Perrin stopped her at the edge of the clearing.

"You've been gone a long time," he said. "Did you have fun?"

"Yes, didn't you?" she asked. "Or has the fun fled your heart altogether?"

“That boy puts me in mind of Wil al’ Seen. You always had sense enough not to let Wil put you in his pocket.”

“I’m in no boy’s pocket, Perrin Aybara.” Her back straightened and her voice got tight. “Aram is gentle and fun to be with. He makes me laugh. I won’t work at being miserable, even if you do.”

“Would you work at being Aes Sedai? Because that will never happen here. Or don’t you remember how bad you want to get to Tar Valon?”

“And I thought you didn’t like me wanting to become an Aes Sedai,” Egwene said with a toss of her head. “Besides, I’ve been doing my exercises. Half the time, I can even get a lick of flame.”

“Blood and ashes, do you believe we’re safe here? Are these people safe with us here? A fade could find us anytime.”

She touched the string of beads with a trembling hand. She lowered it and took a deep breath. “Whatever will happen will happen, whether we leave today or next week. That’s what I believe.”

Perrin sighed. “I’m sorry. I’m glad you’re having fun. I’m just...on edge.”

He’s just a lost little boy. We’re both lost. Egwene’s throat tightened and her eyes started to well up. She threw her arms around Perrin’s neck.

“Tell me,” she said into his chest.

Perrin put an arm around her and patted her on the head. He was nearly a head shorter than Rand, but still a fair deal taller than Egwene. “Tell you? Tell you what?”

She pushed back from him, putting her forearms against his chest and her hands on his shoulders. “Rand and Mat. The others. Tell me they are alive.”

He took a deep breath and looked around uncertainly. “They’re alive,” he said finally.

“Good.” She wiped a tear from her right cheek. “That’s all I wanted to hear. Good night, Perrin. Sleep well.” She stood on tiptoe and brushed a kiss across his cheek, then hurried past him and went to bed.

In the distant night, the wolves howled the first thin sliver of the new moon toward the horizon. Perrin shivered.

These few days with the Traveling People had been trying. They were moving southeast, which was the right direction, but the Tinkers saw no need to hurry. Apparently, they never did. Camp didn’t break until the sun was well above the horizon, and they stopped as early as mid-afternoon if they came across an agreeable spot. In between, the wagons set a pace that the dogs could keep trotting alongside. Even children got out and kept pace, running here and there, laughing at everything. Perrin suggested more than once that they make haste, but the Tinkers just laughed at him, shook their heads, and kept on moving slowly forward.

Perrin thought Elyas would share his misgivings. The man so bound to wolves could not have been more out of place in the Tinker camp. His lazy, lupine grace— only emphasized by the skins and fur hat he wore— radiated danger as naturally as fire does heat. The Traveling People, though, were joyful on their feet. There was no danger in their grace, only delight. Even greybeards and grandmothers stepped lightly, with a gait that seemed like dancing until you saw how they really danced. Indeed, the only times Perrin saw their air of joy slip was when the Tinkers noticed his axe, and in the look they gave Elyas when he couldn’t see them— the wary look of half-tame deer. And Elyas was no more comfortable with their Way of the Leaf than they were with him. Yet whenever Perrin suggested leaving, Elyas grinned with a sparkle in his discomfiting yellow eyes. “Come, let’s rest a few days,” he would say. “Are you in such a hurry to return to hard days filled with trollocs and halfmen and Aes Sedai?”

“What if the fades find us?” Perrin had asked once. “Three wolves can’t hold them off, and the Tinkers won’t be any help. The trollocs will butcher them, and it will be our fault.”

“Something tells me to wait. Just a few days.”

“Something.”

“Relax, lad. Take life as it comes. Run when you have to, fight when you must, rest when you can. A few more days— it’s important. I don’t get feelings like this often, but when I do, I’ve learned to trust them. You want to run on? Run on. Not me.”

Those words had done little to comfort Perrin, or to scratch his itch to get away. Elyas told him to relax. Egwene told him to enjoy himself. But all Perrin could do was worry. At least the wolves agreed with him. They wanted to leave. Perrin could feel their impatience; every day his awareness grew sharper, clearer, stronger. And as much as this thing with the wolves creeped him out, he felt a strange comfort knowing the wolves also thought it foolish to stay. But Elyas had won the day, and they remained with the Tinkers.

After Egwene went to bed, Perrin wandered among the Tinker wagons, his mind in knots over the danger they were in, the danger they were subjecting the Traveling People to just by being there. He saw some as he walked around, still awake, still singing and dancing, at ease and untroubled. *These people took us in, and we repay their kindness with the threat of death and worse at the hands of trollocs and halfmen.* Perrin sighed as he came back to Raen and Ila’s fire. There was nothing he could do but wait until Egwene and Elyas were ready to leave. He turned in, hoping it would not be long.

The wolves found him in his dreams, as they had every night since they met Elyas. This time, he was sitting at the Luhans’ kitchen table, sharpening his axe. He knew it was a dream straight away, as he would never bring forge work, or anything that smacked of it, inside the house. Mistress Luhhan would skin him. Not to mention the large wolf curled up between

him and the door to the yard. He went on sharpening, watching the firelight reflected off the edge of the blade. *Your time ain't far off now.*

A rumbling came from the wolf's throat, and the thick fur on her neck stood on end. A man dressed in white, with a plum scarf wrapped around his neck and hiding the bottom half of his face, opened the door and came in from the cold. When he lowered his scarf and flashed a smile, Perrin saw flames in his eyes for a half second.

"There you are!" the man said. "It's so good to see you."

Perrin scrambled to his feet, raising the axe. "Væ'alza."

"You know, I'm doing my best to bring you in, away from the Aes Sedai. To get you free of their schemes and among true friends. But you make it so difficult." He rubbed his hands together and looked at the growling wolf. The flames returned quickly and then were gone. He sighed and clicked his tongue. "Is this what you have to protect you now? You think such beasts can keep you safer than I?"

Væ'alza crooked a finger, and the wolf howled, screamed, as fire burst out of her eyes and ears and mouth, out of her skin. She ran forward blindly, crashing into a cupboard and knocking it down. The varnish on the wood blackened and smoked, but it did not catch fire. The wolf howled and darted back toward Perrin, the stench of her burning meat and hair filling the kitchen. Perrin dropped the axe and caught her around her neck. He tried to beat out the flames with his hands, but the wolf crumpled to black ash between his palms. In his ears and in his mind he heard the interminable echo of the wolf's pain. *This is real. The sister is dead. I never even learned her name.* Perrin stared at the shapeless pile of char on the clean-swept floor. He wanted to wipe the greasy soot from his hands, but the thought of smearing the wolf off on his clothes turned his stomach. He snatched up the axe, gripping the haft until his knuckles cracked.

"You call yourself friend?" he said through gritted teeth. "My friends don't deal in death and pain this way."

“Don’t they? You think the Aes Sedai have no blood on their hands? If you are the one, these beasts cannot keep you safe from your true enemies. I can. I will do whatever it takes to make you see that.”

“Leave me alone! I wish you would all just leave me alone.”

“I wish we all could. But that is not the way of things. You need us, boy. Without our help, the Eye of the World is more likely to consume you than serve you as it should.”

Perrin felt boxed in, trapped in the suddenly hot and airless kitchen. He backed away from Væ’alza.

“Cut the puppeteers’ strings, old friend. Together, we can do great things. When we are done, the Eye of the World will seem a mere trinket. Don’t be long now. I’m waiting.”

The man turned around and opened the door, then walked out into the yard. He left the door open, and Perrin rushed to close it, as if that would keep him safe somehow. As he stepped forward, a swarm— a *flood*— of ravens came from nowhere and flew through the open door and straight at Perrin. He screamed and raised his arms to protect his face, but it was no use. He felt the ravens like a massive wall of thorns pushing him backward. One came down from above and got behind Perrin’s arms. It jabbed with its long, sharp beak and plucked his left eye out.

“My eye! My eye!” Perrin screamed as he sat up. “The Eye!” He felt at his face desperately to assure himself he still had both eyes.

Elyas was sitting up beside him, almost as if he had been waiting for Perrin to rouse. “Must have been some dream. You’re alright now, lad.”

Perrin was breathing hard, still feeling dazed from the dream. Raen emerged from the dark. “The Eye?” he asked, a look of serious concern on his face. “What eye is that, son?”

“The Eye—” Perrin said between breaths— “The Eye of the World.” As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he regretted saying them. This was something to be guarded more closely. But he was still out of sorts, still gathering his wits after that dream. He felt at his face again. *So real. It felt so real.* As he gathered himself, he could sense the wolves in the distance. He felt what they felt. *Fire. Pain. Fire. Hate. Hate! Kill!* Perrin looked at Elyas and knew that he felt the same things.

Raen crouched next to Perrin and looked across at Elyas. “The Eye of the World,” he said. “Yes. I have a story I think you should hear.”

To Four Kings

It took four days for Rand to decide that farms were not worth the trouble.

One of the first things Rand and Mat realized as they started down the Caemlyn Road was that, even with the extra coin from Captain Domon, their money was too short to eat or sleep at inns every night. Or even most nights. Spend it at inns and their money would be gone way before they got to Caemlyn. Besides, they thought it wiser to save it for as long as possible, in case they ran into real trouble down the way. Instead of inns, they aimed to find their lodging with generous farmers along the road. They could work a few hours at dawn or dusk and get a hot bite and a bed in return. It seemed so simple.

Silly them.

They tried four farms the first night. Two farmers turned them away. A third set his dogs on them before they even got to the door. But the last one was the worst.

After having dogs set on them— Mat had to hit one pretty hard with his staff just so they could get away— Rand and Mat approached the fourth farmhouse warily. A stooped old man with oxbow skin and thin, grey hair met them on the dirt path running from the Caemlyn Road to the front door. His face was twisted as if he'd smelled something foul, and Rand expected to be refused again. But not ten minutes later he and Mat were stripped to the waist, mucking out stalls, covered in sweat and straw.

“I don't trust them,” Mat said.

“They’ll give us some roast lamb and a real bed,” Rand said. “Have you heard a better offer? Did I miss one?”

Mat grunted as he dug his hayfork into the straw and manure. “He’s up to something, I tell you,” Mat said. “See the way he wouldn’t meet my eye? I ain’t like it. Besides, why are they so friendly to a couple of wanderers they never laid eyes on before? Tell me that.”

“We remind the wife of their grandsons,” said Rand. “That’s not a good enough reason? Stop worrying about them. Our worries chase us from behind.”

“He’s up to something,” Mat said, more to his own chest than to Rand.

When they finished in the stalls, they washed up at the trough in front of the barn. Mat dunked his head in the water, and by the time he lifted it back up, Rand had strapped on his sword belt and pulled on his shirt. Mat used his shirt to towel off as they started toward the farmhouse. Their shadows stretched before them, made long by the sinking sun. They found the farmer waiting for them in the doorway, leaning on a quarterstaff. Their things were sitting just outside the door. Past the farmer stood his wife, clutching her apron and peering at them over his shoulder. Rand sighed.

“Our sons are visiting tonight,” the old man said. “All four of them. I forgot. They’re all four coming. Be here any time, now. Big lads. I’m afraid we won’t have room for you tonight.”

“Here.” The farmer’s wife thrust a small bundle wrapped in a napkin past her husband and into Rand’s hands. “Here’s some bread, and cheese, and pickles, and lamb. Enough for two meals, maybe.” Her face was puckered with worry. *Afraid for us or afraid of us? Doesn’t matter now, I suppose.*

Rand grabbed his stuff, shoving the package of food into his pack before quickly donning his coat and cloak. “Thank you. Come on, Mat.”

Mat didn’t move, except to shrug his way into his shirt. He just stood there, staring down the farmer before finally bending down for his things. He

threw his coat and cloak on, then put his pack over his shoulder. Rand was turning to leave when Mat pulled his staff from his pack.

“Do you really think to chase us off by flashing your quarterstaff at us, old man?”

Bollocks.

Rand stepped between the two men with staffs, one hand on Mat’s chest and the other at his own hip, holding the hilt of Father’s sword in case things turned ugly.

“Mat,” he said, “We’re leaving. Trouble will only get us more trouble.”

The farmer had his staff in a ready position, but he had fear painted all over his face. *Serves you right for reneging on an agreement with two armed strangers.* The farmer was a fool, and a rude one at that, but that was no reason for him to bleed.

“Mat.”

Mat gave the farmer one last glare before turning and walking toward the road. Rand followed after him, pausing only once to look over his shoulder at the farmer. “It’s a base and lowly thing to break one’s word,” he said, then hurried after Mat.

“What was that?” he asked when they were back on the Caemlyn Road.

“The man was a liar and a fool,” Mat said. “Ain’t did nothing but scare him, anyhow.”

“And that was going to win us a night in their bed? The only way that ends with us in the beds is if we put those two in the dirt. And we’ll not be killing over an hour and a half of chores.”

Mat muttered to himself, his words too quiet for Rand to make out. They walked the rest of the night more or less in silence, finally finding a hedge

to sleep under a few miles down the road.

Mat fell asleep quickly. Rand stayed up a while longer, thinking about the unfriendly farmers, and the dogs, and the man who went back on his word. Most of all, he thought about Thom. He felt a long way from the Two Rivers. When the tears came, he tried to keep them quiet; no need to wake Mat.

The next day was better. They spent a good chunk of the day on wagons willing to let them hitch a ride, and the second farm they stopped at that night took them in for help with the next morning's chores. When they left, the woman gave them each a scarf— worn and scratchy, but a kindness in the last days of winter.

“I don't know what you're running from,” she said, “and I don't want to. These ain't much, but they's yours. Belong to my boys, but they have others. You two stay safe.” They started back to the road when she called out again. “Hey. You don't know me, understand? It's hard times.” Then she turned around and vanished into the house.

The third day was all walking. No one offered them a ride. Some stretches were silent, and some filled with stiff and awkward talk. Rand and Mat were never friends before Winternight, and while the last few weeks had bound their fates together, they had not brought any newfound ease or smoothness to their conversations.

In their silences, Rand often thought about home. He thought of Father and the farm. He thought of the Mayor, and of what he'd tell him if Egwene and the others... *They're fine. They'll be waiting for us in Caemlyn.*

Rand sighed. Without thinking, he said, “I can't believe how much I miss my father.”

Mat grunted. “How else would you feel? I'd lay silver he feels the same,” he said. “My da, he's probably glad to be rid of me for a spell.”

Rand bit his tongue. He was inclined to let the matter die. Challenging Mat about his growing rancor would only earn more of it. Still, Mat had no cause to be so ill tempered, and was bound to offend and embitter his last and only travel companion if he kept it up. Rand opened his mouth to say so, but surprised himself by instead answering the question Mat had asked so offhandedly.

“Father and I— well, we haven’t been getting on for a long while now. Before Winternight, I would have counted you a fool to guess that I’d miss him. Though now it seems I’d have been the fool for doing so.”

“Why would you not get on? I ain’t once heard of you getting into trouble, or being willful, or lazy.”

Rand was silent for a moment before answering. “It’s just a feeling. It’s the past few years, really. More and more, I’ve felt like we don’t have much in common. I’m not like him. I don’t like being so far from the village. I don’t like having no one else to talk to, to spend time with. I don’t even— every year, every month, I look less and less like my father. I look in the mirror and think, ‘This is what Mother must have looked like.’ Prettier, I’m sure, but still. Who was she? What would she be like if she were... you, know, if she had lived?

“Now I miss a father I don’t get on with and a mother I never knew. The al’Thor family.”

Mat looked down at the road, kicking some pebbles ahead of them as they walked.

“My da never really cared much for me,” Mat said. “He loves his girls, yeah. Loves them to bits. But I was always too much trouble. Never clean enough. Never polite enough. Never worked hard enough for him. And I’ll tell you, that man ain’t got a cricket’s worth of humor to him. Does his best to strangle the fun out of everything. No, I don’t miss him.”

Mat was fair hissing at the end. Rand kept quiet; he didn’t know what to say. He thought they had entered another silent stretch when Mat spoke up

again.

“I reckon all families are like that. They’re never how you want them to be.”

“Maybe,” Rand said. He didn’t know much about other people’s families, except that Egwene wanted to keep her goings-on with Rand secret from hers. “I guess everyone gets stuck with people they didn’t choose.”

Mat grunted. “I aim to choose.”

That was the last thing either of them said until they came upon the Grinwells’ farm an hour later.

Master Grinwell was a sturdy man with nine children; like as not he needed no extra help from Mat and Rand. Still, he looked them up and down, taking in their travel-stained clothes and dusty boots, and allowed as how he could always find work for more hands.

“Well,” Mistress Grinwell said, “if you’re to eat at my table, it won’t be in those filthy rags. Come with me. Some of Master Grinwell’s old clothes will fit well enough for working, and I’m about to do laundry any way.”

The Grinwells seemed like a kind, warm couple. Their children seemed the same. Maybe too warm, in Elsa’s case.

Elsa was the eldest of the Grinwell children, a pretty girl with full lips and big eyes. She was of an age with Rand and Mat, maybe a year younger. She flashed a half smile at Rand whenever her parents weren’t looking. *She smiles like...like Mat.* Rand looked over at Mat, who hadn’t smiled in days. Mat just shrugged and went back to work moving barrels and sacks of grain in the barn. All the while, Elsa hung over a stall door, humming to herself and playing with her long yellow hair. Rand had never seen hair that color. He looked over now and again; every time he did, she was looking his way like a hunter stalking its prey.

It was... confusing. Seeing Elsa look at him like that, it lit a fire in his stomach and put a smile on his face. But then he thought how Egwene would feel about it, which damped the fire down. *Still, I'm not doing anything wrong. But Egwene might not agree, and Master Grinwell surely wouldn't. If he sees that look in his daughter's eye, he's like to loose the dogs on us.*

All in all, Rand just wanted Elsa to stop looking at him. He and Mat had been working barechested, but now Rand pulled on the shirt Master Grinwell had lent him. It was tight across the shoulders and too short, but Rand hoped it would discourage Elsa. Instead, it just made her laugh. She had a nice laugh, thick and throaty. *Oy.* Rand kept his head down and his mouth shut while he worked, but that didn't stop Elsa from talking. Once she told him she liked tall men. All the boys on the farms around there were short. Even Mat laughed at that. Rand couldn't remember the last time he'd heard Mat laugh.

Supper was better; the younger children were there to draw most of the attention. They seemed to cheer Mat, and they gave Rand something to look at besides Elsa. He did catch her looking his way once or twice, but he avoided looking at her parents and the meal passed without incident.

Afterward they all settled in front of the fireplace. Master Grinwell sat in his favorite chair, thumbing his pipe full of tabac. Mistress Grinwell had a wooden frame out and was weaving together a rag rug that was about halfway done. Mat dug out Thom's colored balls and began to juggle for the children. Rand hadn't seen him juggle since the *Spray*. *It must be the children.* They laughed when he pretended to be dropping the balls, snatching them at the last minute, and they clapped for fountains and figure-eights and a six-ball circle that he really did almost drop. Mat cracked a genuine grin a few times, and Rand couldn't help but smile, even as he was reminded so strongly of their fallen friend.

With Mat having already set a laughing mood with his juggling, one of the younger sons started to sing and dance around the floor. Soon everyone was humming or shouting or warbling along. First they sang *Three Girls in the*

Meadow. Master and Mistress Grinwell clapped along, and the smaller children danced around the floor. Even the smallest boy, who could barely walk, stomped his feet in time. Rand was quiet at first but soon was laughing and singing, clapping and stomping, feeling better than he had since they'd fled Whitebridge. When they finished *Three Girls*, they went right on into *The Wind That Shakes the Willow* and *Coming Home from Tarwin's Gap*.

Elsa sat cross-legged in front of the fire, singing with the rest of them. As the third song ended, she leaned toward Rand with a long sigh and smiled at him. "You have a lovely singing voice," she said. "Quite beautiful, really."

Well, that's nonsense. I can carry a tune, usually, but no one has ever asked for seconds of my singing.

Mistress Grinwell paused and looked up from her rug. She raised an eyebrow at her daughter, then gave Rand a long once-over with her eyes. *No. No. I am **not** getting us thrown out of this house. Our clothes aren't even dry.* Rand broke into *Mistress Aynora's Rooster*, and could not have been more relieved when the children and, eventually, the parents joined in. They sang three more songs and then finished with *The Old Black Bear*. Mistress Grinwell never took her eyes off him the whole time. She never said anything, either, but she watched, and weighed.

As *The Old Black Bear* came to an end, Master Grinwell finally stood up, chuckling and rubbing his hands together. "Well, this has been rare fun, but it's well past our bedtime. Mayhap two traveling lads such as yourselves make your own hours, but morning comes early on a farm."

"Yes, sir," Rand said. "My father—I used to work my father's farm."

"Good, then. Mother, would you get these boys some blankets? That should make the barn a mite cozier."

Mistress Grinwell got blankets for them, then set about putting all the children to bed while Mat and Rand said their goodnights. Master Grinwell shook their hands and kissed their cheeks, and they gave hugs and head

rubs to the younger children. They each exchanged a bow for a curtsy from Elsa. Rand felt his cheeks go hot from the look of Elsa's eyes and the crooked half smile on her lips.

Rand could hear his heartbeat as he walked to the barn. He took a deep breath and tried to slow things down. *Sleep. One night's sleep and we're on the road in the morning. One night's sleep and we won't even have the chance to get in trouble with Master Grinwell.* Mat climbed into the hayloft first, and Rand followed right behind. By the time Rand got up the ladder and laid out his blanket, Mat was knocked out in the corner of the loft.

Rand didn't take long to fall asleep himself. It had been a long day of walking and working. As he lay down, he finally felt how tired he was. He had just enough time to think that he was going to sleep deeply before he lost the world and the world lost him.

Waking up felt like someone tugging hard at a rope tied around his waist, tugging when he was relaxed, when he didn't even know the rope was there. Everything was hot, and ticklesome, and wet. It only took a second for Rand to realize that Elsa had climbed up the ladder and under his blanket. She was on top of him now, kissing on his neck and running her hands under her shirt, scratching at his chest.

"Wh-what are you doing?"

"Rand."

"No— what— stop!"

"Stop faking. Kiss me."

Rand heard Mat stirring to his left.

"You can't be here," Rand said. "I have a— you can't be here. Do you know what your father will do if he finds you like this?"

Elsa opened her mouth, but instead of answering, she lowered her head to his shoulder and took the skin of his neck lightly between her teeth. Her right hand scratched all the way down to his stomach, then slid under the front of his sleeping trousers.

“I don’t think you want me to stop,” she said, grabbing the hardness between his legs.

Rand squirmed, and even he couldn’t tell if he was pulling away from Elsa or pushing into her.

“Oy,” said Mat with a mumble in his mouth, “you really think that’s the wisest, al’ Thor?” He yawned and stretched his back.

“Elsa, it’s not— Stop! — it’s not that I don’t— look, I have a— Elsa!”

“Elsa!” a voice echoed from the house.

Rand thought that would stop her, but she just smiled and kissed him hard on his mouth.

Full lips.

Rand pushed her off him and tried to sit up.

“Well, shit,” Mat said. Rand shot him a look. Even Mat never used such language at home, at not least that Rand had heard.

They both stood up and started pulling their boots, coats and cloaks over their nightclothes. Elsa just sat there smiling while they dressed, buttoning her blouse. *Her blouse was unbuttoned? How did I miss that?* He shook his head, grabbed his things, and tossed them to the barn floor. Half a second later Mat did the same, then near enough vaulted down the ladder. Rand stepped on the first rung, then looked at Elsa, sitting on a bale of hay. Somehow her smile looked more innocent than wicked this time.

“Bollocks,” he said. “One more kiss.”

It took just two long steps to cover the distance between them. He ran the fingers of his left hand through her hair and cupped the back of her head, then put his right hand on her hip as he kissed her. She took his right hand in her left and lifted it. He expected her to put his hand on her chest, like Egwene liked to do. Instead, she brought his hand just high enough to clear the hem of her nightgown, then plunged it between her legs. She had no underclothes. He felt the coarse hair, like damp moss, then the slick softness underneath. He tried to push away but couldn't. It wasn't that she held him or stopped him somehow. He just couldn't make his body move toward the ladder.

She broke away from the kiss. "Stick your fingers in my pussy," she said in a loud, hoarse whisper, her breath hot in his ear.

He began to slide his finger deeper into the slit he felt when he heard the door to the house slam shut.

"Elsa!" Master Grinwell called.

That got Rand moving. He was down the ladder in two heartbeats. As he gathered his things, he heard Elsa Grinwell chuckling in the loft. *Has she done this before? Will she get punished?* Rand didn't spend time thinking about the answers, he just started running. Mat was already halfway to the road.

"Come back here!" Master Grinwell cried, but his voice was already fading behind him. "You base varlets!"

Rand thought they had gotten away when he heard the whispering whistle of an arrow that landed about three paces to his left. Two more arrows came close before he was out of range, but none hit. Rand's heart felt like a drum between his ears, *sounded* like a drum.

Once he realized they were firmly out of bowshot, Rand couldn't stop smiling. It had been terrifying, but a thrill, as well. Egwene was the only girl he'd ever kissed, and Elsa was very different than Egwene. For one thing, Elsa clearly didn't care who knew that they were kissing. *More* than

kissing. And the way she talked, the way she felt between her legs. In a few minutes, Elsa had blown his sense of what was possible with girls completely open. He couldn't stop smiling.

The walk was quiet. Mat didn't say much. He seemed caught between amusement and annoyance. About two miles up from the Grinwells' they came to another farm. They spent the rest of the night in one of the haystacks dotting the field. Before the cock crowed, they were up and on the road again.

So it was that, four days after they fled Whitebridge, Rand decided that farms were not worth the trouble. The rest of the way they spent thumbing rides and walking, sleeping under hedges or in haystacks, until they came to Four Kings three and a half days later.

By that time, Mat's mood had soured again. He was tired of sleeping outdoors and wanted to spend the night in a bed for once— especially as dark clouds built up overhead for an icy rain during the night. Surely they had enough coin between them for a single night. Rand wasn't convinced; they might need that coin for something more important than a single night's sleep down the way. How could they know?

"If you're so anxious to spend coin," Rand said, "maybe you should sell your dagger. That ruby would fetch a small fortune."

He went on a few steps before he realized that Mat had stopped. Rand stopped, too, wriggling his toes in his boots. At least his feet felt warm. "Heyo. Why are we stopped?" he said.

"See here, why are you so anxious to sell it?" Mat said. "Was I what found it. You ever think I might like to keep it? For a while, anyway. If you want to sell something, sell that bloody sword."

"Are you serious right now? My father *gave* me this sword," Rand said, his voice growing sharp as he traced the heron mark on the hilt with two fingers. "It was his. The dagger wasn't a gift, and I'd not suggest selling it if it were. Besides, how much would a sword even bring? What would a

farmer want with it? We'd get enough from the dagger to ride all the way to Caemlyn in a carriage. Maybe all the way to Tar Valon. And we'd eat every meal in an inn, and sleep every night in a bed."

They stood there glaring at each other until Mat finally sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. "Who would I sell it to, al'Thor? A farmer would have to pay in chickens. Can't buy a carriage with chickens. And if I even showed it in any village we've been through, they'd probably hold us for thieves."

Rand thought for a minute, then nodded reluctantly. "You're right. I'm sorry. Sorry for snapping at you. I'm just hungry, and my feet hurt."

Mat took a second, then nodded with a grunt and started walking again. Within half an hour they came upon Four Kings.

The village was bigger than most they had seen, but still seemed a bit scruffy to bear a name like Four Kings. As usual, the Caemlyn Road ran straight through the center of the town, but another heavily traveled highway came in from the south, too. Most villages were markets and gathering places for the farmers of the area, but Rand didn't see many farmers here. These people all seemed to be travelers and merchants. And all men—no women or families that he saw.

Stables and horse-lots lined the streets, all of which were wide enough to allow wagons to pass and deeply rutted from many wheels over many years. Four Kings had no village green, and no children out playing. No women stood gossiping over the fence with a neighbor. Drab wooden houses stood cheek by jowl, with only narrow alleys between and whitewash—where anyone had bothered to whitewash the weathered boards—faded as if it had not been freshened in years. Heavy shutters on the houses had not been open in so long that the hinges were solid lumps of rust.

A few buildings stood out among the leaden houses, garishly painted in greens and yellows that caught the eye from afar. The signs hanging over their doors and the raucous laughter spilling out into the street marked them for inns. Their noise felt more bitter and brittle than joyful, and mixed

uneasily with the other sounds that hung over the town— clanging from blacksmiths; shouts from wagon drivers; the low, constant whistle of the wind.

In the failing light of dusk, Rand stumbled in a rut, then leapt quickly to avoid a heavy-laden wagon clattering the other way. The driver spat a curse at him as it rolled by.

Mat looked toward the skies. Rand followed his eyes up to the dark clouds thickening overhead.

“We’ll have a hard rain tonight,” Mat said. “Harder than we’ve seen yet.” He looked at Rand. “I ain’t sleeping outside. You do as you fancy, al’ Thor, I’m gonna see what my coin will get me. Maybe one of these inns will trade lodging for some fine juggling in the common room.”

“I don’t know about this town,” Rand said. “Maybe we’d better move on.”

But Mat was already heading on a line for the one inn that seemed to be quiet— the last one along the Caemlyn Road. Rand followed doubtfully.

The three inns they passed were loud and raucous, overflowing with coarse laughter, drunken shouting, and music. Rand had never heard such music. There were zithers and drums and recorders, and at least a couple of instruments he didn’t recognize. He stopped at one inn just to see what was making these sounds. Peeking in the door, he saw tables filled with roughly dressed men waving mugs and trying to fondle serving maids. The building shook with the racket, and was soaked in the sour smell of old wine and unwashed bodies. The musicians were on the far side of the common room. Some were hidden, but some he could see clearly on the small stage where they were performing. A woman held a stringed instrument, something like a lute, but with an hourglass-shaped body. Instead of plucking it, though, she rubbed some sort of stick or bar across the strings. It sounded dark and warm and fluid.

Another man was playing some sort of pipe instrument that he worked with his hands, but Rand couldn’t see it very well. He thought he could get a

better look, but a quick glance told him that he had already fallen too far behind Mat. With a sigh he ran to catch up, reaching Mat just as he stepped into The Dancing Cartman.

Rand could see why this inn was quiet. Outside, the paint, once as loud and showy as that of the other inns, was cracked and peeling. Inside, the common room was empty except for half a dozen men, each sitting alone at a table, hunched over an ale or a whiskey. Or both. Dirt crusted the floor and cobwebs filled the corners of the ceiling. There were as many serving maids as patrons, but as far as Rand could tell, they just moved about so they would not be seen standing still. None of them really did anything.

A bony man with long, stringy hair down to his shoulders turned to scowl at them as they came through the door. The first slow peal of thunder rumbled across Four Kings. "What do you want?" He was rubbing his hands on a greasy apron that hung to his ankles. *What good does it do to wipe grimy hands on a grimier apron? Even odds his hands are getting dirtier with every wipe.* "Well? Speak up, buy a drink, or get out!"

"See here," said Mat said with a grin, "it looks like this place could use some entertainment. I'm a juggler, so I am, and my friend here will delight men and women alike with his tumbling tricks, and he can spin a tale that will fix your patrons in their seats. We two were apprentices to that noble gleeman Thom Merrill, who I'm sad to say died not ten days past. We don't claim to be master gleemen yet, but we know enough to help your custom. All we ask is a meal and a place to sleep."

Rand stared at Mat. He had heard tell of the mischief Mat would get into back home, the pranks and schemes that relied mostly on his charming tongue and that disarming grin, but he hadn't had many opportunities to see Mat work an angle. His words seemed effortless, lighter than feathers. *It's as though he's not the same boy I've been walking with this past week.* Rand found this seeming turnabout in mood even more shocking than seeing his first-ever skinny innkeeper.

"I've got a man what plays the dulcimer," the innkeeper said.

“You have a drunk, Saml Hake,” one of the serving maids said. She was passing him with a tray and two mugs, and she paused to give Rand and Mat a smile that put two dimples in her plump cheeks. “Even when he’s here, which ain’t common, he can’t play for being in his cups.” Rand now noticed a man sleeping in the corner, draped over a small dulcimer.

Without taking his eyes off Rand and Mat, the innkeeper— Hake, she had called him— casually backhanded her across the face. She gave a surprised grunt and fell to the unwashed floor. One of the mugs broke, and the spilled wine washed rivulets in the dirt, where it mixed with the blood she spat out of her mouth. “You’re docked for the wine and the breakage. Get ’em fresh drinks. And hurry. Men don’t pay to wait while you laze around.” His tone was as offhand as the blow. None of the patrons looked up from their wine, and the other serving maids kept their eyes averted.

The plump woman rubbed her cheek and stared pure murder at the innkeeper, but she gathered the empty mug and the broken pieces on her tray and went off without a word.

Hake sucked his teeth thoughtfully, eyeing Rand and Mat. His gaze lingered on Rand’s sword before he pulled it away. “Tell you what,” he said finally. “You can have a couple of pallets in an empty storeroom in the back. Rooms are too expensive to give away. You eat when everybody’s gone. There ought to be something left.”

Rand wanted desperately to turn around and leave, but he didn’t think Mat would follow, and he couldn’t very well leave him there alone. And honestly, he did not relish the idea of sleeping under another hedge.

“The pallets will do if they’re clean,” Mat said, “and if there are enough clean blankets. But we eat two hours after full dark, no later, and the best you have.”

Hake’s thin smile touched nothing but his lips. “Eat when you want, but if you don’t bring the crowd in, out you go in the street.” He nodded over his shoulder at two hard-faced men sitting against the wall. They were not

drinking, and their arms were thicker than Rand's legs. When the innkeeper nodded at them, their eyes shifted to Rand and Mat, flat and expressionless.

Rand put one hand on his sword hilt, trying to keep his face still even as his stomach tied itself in knots.

"As long as we get what's agreed on," Mat said. He was still grinning, but the grin had an edge to it now. A menace. Rand was both sad and relieved that this was more like the Mat he had been traveling the Caemlyn Road with.

The innkeeper blinked, then nodded. "I said the words, ain't I? Well, get started. You won't bring anybody in just standing there. Jak, Strom." The two toughs trailed behind him as he stalked off, scowling and shouting at the serving maids as if they were neglecting fifty customers.

This common room was much like the one down the road that Rand had just peeked into, only filthy and in disrepair. He and Mat made their way over to the stage at the far end of the room, near the door to the back.

"What is this?" Rand said quietly. "We're no performers."

"We are now," whispered Mat. "I hope you were paying attention during all those lessons aboard the *Spray*. I'd have volunteered you for flute, but we both know that would've been disastrous. Besides, now we get to keep our coin. You should be pleased."

Rand climbed onto the stage and settled his haversack, his blanketroll, and Thom's bundled cloak at the back, then covered the pile with his own cloak and laid the sword on top. Mat walked to the table at the end of the stage where the dulcimer player was passed out and shook him awake. He told the man to start playing, as he and Rand would be putting on a show and needed some musical accompaniment.

Rand reached a hand out and helped Mat up. Mat dug out his juggling balls out and stood up tall. Rand went and stood at the back of the stage,

nervously hoping Mat would be entertaining enough by himself that Rand could just stay back there all night.

Mat looked at the drunken musician, clearing his throat and tapping his foot until the man started to pluck out some tentative notes. The half-dozen patrons lifted their heads out of their wine. Starting with two balls and just one hand, Mat proceeded to put on a real exhibition, better even than the show he had given the Grinwell children. When he brought his other hand and a third ball into the routine, the music grew steadier and stronger. When he added a fourth ball, Rand felt his stomach unclenching, and soon he was as entranced as the men at the tables.

Several times the men broke out in applause, even the two bouncers. Word spread, and by the time it was dark outside the inn was packed full with men. Many of them brought women with them, wearing fancy underclothes and nothing else, sitting in the men's laps. Rand thought of the house in Baerlon with the women calling out to him, offering to...do things. He felt the heat in his cheeks and ducked his chin to his chest. *That's probably why there were no women or children about. What woman would want to be around such displays, much less bring their children around them?*

Now and again Rand would spell Mat with a series of cartwheels or somersaults, and gained enough confidence that soon he was doing handstands and round offs and backflips, too. The patrons laughed and talked so loudly that Rand could barely hear the dulcimer. He had no problem hearing the thunder when it started, though. Lightning began flashing in the windows, and in the momentary lulls he could hear rain drumming faintly on the roof. Men who came in now dripped trails across the floor.

Whoever was performing, some in the crowd called out for the other. A few fights broke out between those wanting tumbling and those who fancied juggling. Once a knife flashed, and a woman screamed, and a man reeled back from a table with blood streaming down his face. Jak and Strom closed in swiftly and, with complete impartiality, threw everyone involved into the street with lumps on their heads. That was their tactic with any

trouble. The talk and the laughing went on as if nothing had occurred. Nobody even looked around except those the bouncers jostled on their way to the door.

The patrons were free with their hands, too, when one of the serving maids let herself grow unwary. More than once Jak or Strom had to rescue one of the women, though they were none too quick about it. The way Hake carried on, screaming and shaking the woman involved, he always considered it her fault, and the teary eyes and stammered apologies said she was willing to accept his opinion. The women jumped whenever he frowned, even if he was looking somewhere else. *Why do they put up with it? Why would anyone?*

The innkeeper smiled whenever he looked over at them on stage. At first Rand thought it was because they had filled the common room, but after a while he realized the smile was not for them, but for the heron-mark sword behind them. As he walked up to take his next turn, he leaned over to speak in Mat's ear. Even that close he had to speak more loudly than he would have liked, but with all the noise he doubted if anyone else could hear. "That innkeeper will try to rob us before this night's out."

Mat nodded as if he had already concluded as much. "We'll have to bar our door tonight."

"Bar our door? Jak and Strom, they could break down a door with their fists. Let's get *out* of here."

"Do you hear that rain? Let's talk about this when we eat. I'm definitely not going to be out there, cold, wet, *and* hungry. Besides, they can't do anything here." The crowd shouted for them to get on with it, and Hake was glaring at them from across the room. "And if we can avoid any of those three, I aim to try. I won't be scared off."

Mat slumped onto the stool to take his rest. Rand sighed went into a handstand. *Trouble is, Mat's right. I'm hungry, too, and don't mean to stay that way. The innkeeper can't give us any trouble, not so long as the room is full.* And the room *was* full, and getting fuller. For every man who left or

was thrown out by Jak and Strom, two more came in. They quickly joined in the shouts for the juggling or the tumble show, but mostly they were interested in drinking and fondling the serving maids.

One man was different, though. He stood out in every way. The other patrons were all rough-dressed, with scruffy beards and the tough skin of men who labored in the sun and wind. They could have been from the Two Rivers. This other man was taller than anyone else in the room, save Rand. He was clean shaven, with soft skin and a velvet coat. The cloak slung around his shoulders was velvet, too, dark green, and lined with blue silk. Rand thought he must be a merchant, which would make him the only one at The Dancing Cartman. The man ignored the serving maids, and none of the other men seemed inclined to share his table. He sat there as if the room were empty except for him. Him— and Rand and Mat. He watched the boys over steeped hands that glittered with a ring on each finger. He wore a smug smile that spoke of satisfaction.

When Mat stepped up to take his place, Rand mentioned the rich man. Mat nodded. “I seen him,” he said. “Who *is* he? I keep thinking I know him.” Rand had thought the same, a tickle of familiarity at the back of his memory, but he could not bring it forward.

When Mat finished his round of juggling, he gathered up his things and motioned to Rand to do the same. As they stepped down from the low platform, Hake came bustling up, his narrow face twisted in anger.

“Where do you think you’re going, there?” he asked.

“It’s time to eat,” Mat said. The easy charm had returned to his voice, but now Rand heard a hardness underneath. “We don’t want our things stolen while we’re in the kitchen. Could you please let the cook know?” The innkeeper hesitated, still angry. His eyes kept coming back to the sword, so Rand shifted his bundles so he could rest a hand on the hilt. Mat saw all of this, and regained Hake’s attention by tapping his staff on the floor a few times. “Or you can *try* throwing us out. There’s a lot of night left for us to play, still. My friend ain’t even spun a tale yet. We can have this crowd

spending money all night, but only if we keep our strength up. How long do you think this room will stay full if we fall over from hunger?”

The innkeeper’s eyes twitched over the room full of men putting money in his pocket, then he turned and stuck his head through the door to the rear of the inn. “Feed ’em!” he shouted. Rounding on Rand and Mat, he snarled, “Don’t be all night about it. I expect you up there till the last man’s gone.”

The kitchen was large— hot and steamy, with a huge table covered with half-prepared food and dishes ready to be served. When the heavy door closed, Rand could hardly hear the shouts from the common room on the other side. Unless someone opened the door, the loudest sound was the rain pounding the roof. Some serving maids sat clustered on a bench near the rear door, rubbing their feet and chattering away all at once with the fat cook, who talked back at the same time and waved a big wooden spoon to emphasize her points. They all glanced up when Rand and Mat walked in, but they didn’t slow their conversation or stop rubbing their feet.

“We ought to quit this place while we have the chance,” Rand said softly, but Mat shook his head, his eyes fixed on the two plates the cook was filling with beef and potatoes and peas. It looked better than anything they’d had in days, maybe weeks. She hardly glanced at the two of them, keeping up her talk with the other women while she pushed things aside on the table with her elbows and set the plates down, along with a couple of forks.

“After we eat is time enough,” Mat said, sliding onto the bench and digging in with his fork. “We’ve been working that crowd for hours now. We ain’t leaving without a meal, at least.”

Rand was a little pleased that Mat had refused his suggestion. His belly felt as empty as a beggar’s purse, and the cooking smells of the kitchen only made him hungrier. He took a seat next to Mat and quickly had his mouth full. Mat was quicker, though; the cook was refilling his plate before Rand had finished half of his. With both of them too busy eating to talk, Rand couldn’t help but hear bits of the women’s conversation.

“Why would he land in this hole, then?”

“I don’t know, but that’s what I hear. Every other place, he just walked in, looked around, and walked out without saying one word. Even at the Royal Inn.”

“Maybe he thought here was the most comfortable.” That brought gales of laughter.

“He ain’t even get to town till after nightfall, and with the way they’s blowing, you know them horses been pushed hard.”

“It’s a fool plans his travel that badly.”

“Being a fool ain’t so bad when you’re rich. The man has a carriage just for his servants and baggage. And that cloak? I wouldn’t mind having that my ownself.”

“He’s a little ugly in the face for my taste, but I always say— no man’s ugly if he has enough gold.” They all doubled over giggling, and the cook threw back her head and roared with laughter.

Rand dropped his fork on his plate. *Carriages*. “I’ll be back in a minute,” he said. Mat barely nodded, stuffing a piece of potato into his mouth.

Rand picked up his sword belt along with his cloak as he stood, and buckled it around his waist on the way to the back door. No one paid him any mind.

The rain was coming in buckets. He swung his cloak around his shoulders and pulled the hood over his head, holding the cloak closed as he trotted across the stableyard. A curtain of water hid everything except when lightning flashed, but he found what he was hunting. The horses had been taken into the stable, but the two black-lacquered carriages glistened wetly outside. A grumble of thunder, then a flash of lightning, and Rand could make out a name in gold script on the coach doors. *Howal Gode*.

He had seen carriages like this before— in Whitebridge. Black carriages with names in gold lettering. And inside sat soft merchants with fancy cloaks. *Whitebridge*. A Whitebridge merchant could have a perfectly

legitimate reason to be on his way to Caemlyn. *Aye, but a reason that sends him hunting through half the inns in town until he finds the one we happen to be in?*

The rain started trickling down his back, and he turned and hurried back to the inn, splashing through deepening puddles. Jak (or was it Strom?) blocked the door as he started through.

“Well, well, well. Out here alone in the dark. Dark’s dangerous, boy.”

Rain slicked Rand’s hair down across his forehead. Brushing water out of his eyes with one hand, he put the other on his sword. Even wet, the knobby leather made a sure grip for his fingers.

“You know, me and Strom got a bet.” So it *was* Jak. “He figures you stole that from your old grandmother. Me, I figure your grandmother’d kick you round the pigpen and hang you out to dry.” He grinned. With his crooked yellow teeth, it made him look even meaner. “Night’s long yet, boy.”

Rand brushed past, and Jak let him by with an ugly chuckle.

Inside, he tossed off his cloak and flopped back onto the bench. Mat was still eating, but more slowly now. *That must be his third plate.* With Jak leaning against the wall near the door to the stableyard, even the cook seemed to feel no urge to talk.

“He’s from Whitebridge, I’d lay oath on it,” Rand said softly. Mat’s head swiveled toward him, a piece of beef on the end of the fork suspended halfway to his mouth. Conscious of Jak watching, Rand stirred the food on his plate. He had lost his appetite, but he tried to pretend an interest in the peas as he told Mat about the carriages. He also told Mat what the women had said, in case he had not been listening earlier—which he obviously hadn’t. When Rand finished, Mat whistled between his teeth, then tossed his fork down onto his plate.

“After us,” Mat said. “A darkfriend?”

“Mayhap. I don’t know.” Rand glanced at Jak and the big man stretched elaborately, shrugging shoulders as big as any blacksmith’s. “Do you think we can get past him?”

“Not without him making enough noise to bring Hake and the other one. I knew we should never have stopped here.”

Rand stared at Mat for a second, then burst out laughing. He couldn’t help it. That got Mat to laughing, too, and the both of them were near doubled over when the innkeeper pushed through the door from the common room. Strom hung heavy over his shoulder, and Jak took a step to his left to block the back door. “You going to eat all night?” Hake barked. “I didn’t feed you so you could lie around out here.”

Rand looked at Mat, who gave a slight shake of the head before standing up and gathering his things. Before heading into the common room, Mat went and stood face to face with Hake, holding his quarterstaff like a walking stick. He only lingered a second, but it was enough to bring a flash of doubt to the innkeeper’s eyes. Rand almost laughed.

Cries for juggling and tumbling burst through the clamor as soon as Rand and Mat set foot in the common room. The man in the velvet cloak— *Howal Gode*— still seemed to be ignoring everyone around him. When they walked in, he was sitting on the edge of his chair. At the sight of them he leaned back, the satisfied smile returning to his lips.

Mat took the first turn. He was getting a lot of applause, but Rand didn’t really see any of his juggling. *There must be a way out.* He had never realized before what a good trap an inn made. Hake and his men didn’t even have to keep a close eye on them; the crowd would announce it if he or Mat left the stage. A common room full of people meant that Jak and Strom could not just come after them, but it also meant that they could not get away without the innkeeper knowing. And Gode was watching their every move, too.

“Thank you, good people,” Mat said, his grin back on his face. “My friend would now like to share some stories with you. Young master?” He turned

to Rand.

“Uh... how about— I know. This story is called *How Goodwife Karil Cured Her Husband of Snoring*.” Some of the people laughed at that, and Rand smiled. He might have been killing time till he and Mat could get away, but he still hoped they liked the story. It was the first one Thom had taught him.

As he told the story, he just tried to remember what Thom had said. The cadence. The lilt. When to pause for laughter or drama. When to let the words tumble out on top of one another, building their own momentum. By the end, he felt like he had a good rhythm going, and he gave a little smile and bow to the crowd. He thought Thom would’ve been pleased. The crowd seemed to be— they answered his bow with clapping and hooting and hollering. Not Gode, though. He sat stone silent, still wearing his little smile.

When he went to take his turn on the stool, Rand saw Mat with his hand under his coat. *The dagger. If Hake sees that ruby, he might not wait until we’re alone to make a move. For true, if these men see it, half of them might join in with him.*

As much as Rand didn’t want Mat to flash his dagger, he also understood the impulse. When Mat started juggling and Rand sat down, he took a cue from Mat and kept one hand idly on the hilt of Father’s sword. He kept it there through Mat’s entire routine. He was sure Howal Gode saw him, and thought the man might even have marked the heron on the hilt. It was the first Rand had seen him even a little ill at ease, looking at Rand and the sword, clenching and unclenching his fists, interrupting the smile with a decided frown every now and then.

One good thing. If he is worried that I might be a blademaster, maybe he’ll leave us alone. Gode must not have been too worried, though. Sword or no sword, he kept right on staring at them.

When it was Rand’s turn again, he told *The Tale of Belena’s Laundry*— a story that Thom had taught him because it came from Manetheren. It was an old tale, from a battle in a war long forgotten. Rand liked it because it

had no warriors or kings or generals. It was a tale of an ordinary woman, and how she saved the lives of eleven ordinary children. Something about that quite appealed to Rand.

The night went on like this, Mat and Rand trading off and off again. Sometimes Rand would tell a story; sometimes he would do some tumbling. As they went on into the small hours, the common room slowly began to empty. Even those whose rooms were just upstairs staggered off to find their beds. Through it all, Gode remained, watching them. And the longer they watched him watching them, the more agitated Mat got. Rand was a bit rattled himself, worrying that everyone in the room was eyeing them with some hidden motive. But Mat was even worse. By the end of the night, he and Gode were openly staring one another in the eye. Mat's mouth was practically snarling, but the rich merchant remained at ease. His smile only deepened, and he nodded to Mat as if to an old acquaintance. *Goats will sprout feathers before anyone praises Mat Cauthon's tact or discretion.*

When the last of the men headed outside or to their rooms upstairs, Howal Gode was the only patron left. Rand felt like they had been on the stage for a year. He was exhausted and afraid, with no idea of how they would escape. Sour wine fumes and the stench of dirty, sweating bodies made his head swim, and the shouting of a crowd that had dwindled to a handful of patrons still echoed loudly in his head.

Mat and Rand stood up to gather their things. Gode stood up, too, and slung his cloak over his arm. The serving maids were cleaning up, muttering among themselves about the mess of spilled wine and broken crockery. The innkeeper was locking the front door with a big key. Gode cornered Hake for a moment, and Hake called one of the women to show him to a room. As she led him away, he flashed Mat and Rand a knowing smile, then disappeared upstairs.

Mat and Rand climbed down from the stage with Hake looking at them, Jak and Strom standing at his shoulders. Mat held his staff in both hands as they walked toward each other. Rand didn't keep his hand on the hilt of his

sword, but he did hold all his things behind him with his left hand so he could reach the sword if he needed to.

Rand expected Hake to start yelling when they all came together, but instead the innkeeper gave a little bow and gestured to a side door with the oil lamp he was carrying. “Your pallets are this way,” he said. His voice was friendly enough, but he spoke with a slight twist of his lips that Rand didn’t trust.

Mat waved his staff at Jak and Strom. “You need those two to show us our beds?”

“I’m a man of property,” Hake said, smoothing the front of his soiled apron, “and men of property can’t be too careful.” He glanced at the ceiling when a crash of thunder rattled the windows, then gave them a toothy grin. “You want to see your beds or not?”

Rand looked at Mat, wishing they could just leave. But they had nowhere to go and no way to get there. He gave Mat a nod, and Mat turned to Hake. “Lead the way,” he said. “I don’t like having anyone behind me.”

Hake just nodded and turned toward the side door, and the two big men swaggered after him, daring Rand and Mat to follow. Rand reached the door first and saw right off why Hake had the lamp. The hallway beyond was as black as pitch. The innkeeper’s lamp was the only light, silhouetting Jak and Strom. Unnerving, but at least he would know if they turned back toward him. *And do what?* The floor creaked under his boots.

The hall ended in a rough, unpainted door. He had not noticed if there were any other doors along the way. When Hake and his men went through, Rand followed quickly, before they could have a chance to set a trap. Mat was right behind him, ready with his staff, but Hake just lifted the lamp high and gestured at the room.

“Here it is.”

An old storeroom, Hake had called it, and by the look of it, one not used in some time. Weathered barrels and broken crates filled half the floor. Steady drips fell from more than one place on the ceiling, and a broken pane in the filthy window let the rain blow in freely. Unidentifiable odds and ends littered the shelves, and thick dust covered almost everything. Rand did see the pallets, though. That was a bit of a surprise.

Mat walked over and made a show of inspecting the pallets. “This’ll do,” he said. *Of course it’ll do. Not like we aim to sleep a wink here.* Realizing Mat had set down his staff when he knelt down by the pallets, Rand put his right hand on the hilt of his sword and let it rest there. He kept his eyes trained on the innkeeper, wary for a signal to Jak and Strom to attack.

Mat stood back up. “Very good. Leave the lamp.”

Hake grunted, then set the lamp on a dusty shelf. He paused, stole a glance at Rand’s sword, then frowned and jerked his head at his two lackeys. Rand thought they looked surprised, but they followed their master out of the room without a backward glance.

Once the *creak-creak-creak* of their footsteps faded away, Rand started counting, slowly and deliberately. When he got to fifty, he stuck his head out into the hall. The only break in the darkness was the door to the common room, a rectangle of light that seemed like it was miles away. As he pulled his head in, he saw—felt?—something move near that rectangle. Something big. *Jak or Strom.*

Rand closed the door behind him and looked it over quickly. It was heavy enough, but it would do little to stop Jak or Strom, or even Hake for that matter. It had no lock, or bar, or latch.

“Well, it opens in,” Rand said. “So we can block it. If we have anything too heavy for Jak and Strom to move.” He looked around. “Which we do not.”

“I thought they were going for us,” Mat said. “What are they waiting for?” He had traded his staff for the dagger, which he held in a fist so tight Rand half thought he might get some juice out of it.

“For us to go to sleep.” Rand started rummaging through the barrels and crates. “Help me find something to block the door. Heavy won’t do it, so maybe like a wedge or something.”

“Why? You wanted to go. We’ve stalled as much as we can. There’s a window. Let’s fly. I’d rather be wet than dead.”

“That means noise, and noise means trouble. One of the big ones is at the end of the hall. He hears us, he’s in here. Unless we can block it. So help.”

Even with Mat’s help, the search produced nothing useful. Any wood that was small enough to wedge the door was rotted or soft. They couldn’t break apart the larger wooden things, like barrels, without risking being overheard. Then something on a shelf caught Rand’s eye. Two splitting wedges, covered with rust and dust. He took them down with a grin.

He shoved them both under the door and, when the next roll of thunder rattled the inn, drove them in with two quick kicks of his heel. The thunder faded, and he held his breath, listening. All he heard was the rain pounding on the roof.

“The window,” he said.

It was plain from the dirt crusted around it that it had not been opened in years. They strained together, pushing up with all their might. At first the sash refused to budge. Even when it relented, it groaned with each reluctant inch. When the opening was wide enough for them to slip through, he crouched, then stopped.

“Blood and ashes!” Mat said. “No wonder Hake wasn’t worried about us slipping out.”

Iron bars in an iron frame glistened wetly in the light from the lamp. Rand pushed at them; they were as solid as a boulder.

“Bollocks.”

“I saw something,” Mat said. He pawed through the litter on the shelves and came back with a rusty crowbar. He rammed the end of it under the iron frame on one side, and Rand winced.

“Remember the noise, Mat.”

Mat cursed under his breath, but he waited. Rand put his hands next to Mat’s on the crowbar and tried to find good footing in the growing puddle of water under the window. The thunder was coming just a beat after the lightning. He gave Mat a nod, and at the next flash they heaved. The frame shifted— they heard it more than felt it, with a tortured squeal of nails that raised the hairs on Rand’s neck. He looked at the frame.

“A quarter inch,” Rand said.

“If that,” said Mat.

Again and again they heaved on the crowbar, timing themselves with the thunder, finding the rhythm of it. No movement. No movement. A quarter of an inch. Nothing. A hairsbreadth. Nothing. Nothing.

Suddenly Rand’s feet slipped in the water, and they both crashed to the floor. The crowbar clattered against the bars like a gong. He lay in a puddle holding his breath and listening. Silence but for the rain.

Mat nursed bruised knuckles and shot him a glare. “We’ll never get out at this rate.” They had pushed the iron frame out from the window by the width of a finger, maybe a little more.

“We just have to— ”

A creak from the door cut Rand off. Someone was trying to open it, but the splitting wedges were holding. *For the moment.* He exchanged a worried look with Mat, who pulled out his dagger again. The door gave another scream. Rand pulled out his sword and took a ready stance.

Rand took a deep breath and tried to make his voice steady. “Go away, Hake. We’re trying to sleep.”

“I fear you mistake me.” That was a rich man’s voice. *Gode*. “Master Hake and his... minions... will not trouble us. They sleep soundly, and in the morning they will only be able to wonder where you vanished to. Let me in, my young friends. We must talk.”

“Ain’t got nothing to talk about,” Mat said. “Go away. Let us sleep.”

Gode chuckled. A nasty sound. “Of course we have things to talk about. You know that as well as I. I saw it in your eyes. I know what you are, perhaps better than you do. I can feel it coming from you. It comes in waves. If the Tar Valon hags find you, you’ll wish you could cut your own throat before they are done, but you won’t be able to. Only my master can protect you from them.”

“We don’t— we don’t know what you’re talking about,” Rand said. “Leave us alone.”

The floorboards in the hall squeaked. *He’s not alone. How many men could he have brought in two carriages?*

“Stop being foolish, my young friends. You know. You know very well. You are marked for the Lord of Chaos, whom you name the Dark One. It is written that when it awakes, the new *Valdar Mael* will be there to aide it. You must be two of them, else I would not have been sent to find you.”

Lightning flashed again and Rand saw what awaited them outside: men standing watch, ignoring the rain, waiting for them to take the window.

Bollocks.

“I tire of this,” Gode announced. “You will enlist with my master— your master— or you will be made to submit. That is... far less pleasant. The Lord of Chaos can give life in death or death in life as it chooses. Open this door. One way or another, your running is at an end. Open it, I say!”

He must have said something else, too, for suddenly a heavy body thudded against the door. It shivered, and the wedges slid a fraction of an inch. Rand could see where some of the rust had rubbed off on wood. Again. Again. The door trembled as bodies slammed against it. Sometimes the wedges held; sometimes they slid, and bit by tiny bit the door crept inexorably inward.

“Submit,” Gode said, “or spend eternity wishing that you had!”

“Maybe— maybe we could say yes now and then get away later,” Mat said. He looked scared, like a trapped animal. “There’s no way out. No way...”

The words seemed to drift to Rand through wool stuffed in his ears. *No way out.* Lightning flash. Thunder. *Have to find a way out.* Gode called to them, demanding, appealing; the door slid another inch. *A way out.*

Light filled the room, flooding his vision. The air roared and burned. Rand felt himself picked up and dashed against the wall. He slid down in a heap, ears ringing and every hair on his body trying to stand on end. Dazed, he staggered to his feet, knees wobbling. He put a hand against the wall to steady himself and looked around in amazement.

The lamp, lying on its side on the edge of one of the few shelves left hanging on the walls, still burned and gave light. All the barrels and crates, some blackened and smoldering, lay toppled where they had been hurled. The window, bars and all, had vanished. Most of that wall, too. Now there was just a splintered hole. The roof sagged, and wisps of smoke fought the rain around the jagged edges of the opening. The door hung off its hinges, jammed in the doorframe at an angle slanting into the hall.

A pile of crates heaved apart, and Mat stood up in the middle of it. He weaved on his feet, blinking and fumbling at himself as if wondering if everything were still attached. He peered toward Rand.

“Al’ Thor?” Rand could hardly hear him, like he had wool in his ears. Mat must have noticed the same thing, because when he spoke again he was fair shouting. “Is that you? You’re alive. I thought we were both— ” He broke

off, biting his lip and shaking. It took Rand a moment to realize he was laughing.

“What happened, Mat? Mat? Come on, keep it together. What happened?”

Mat gave one last shiver, then was still. “Lightning. I was looking right at the window when it hit the bars. Lightning. I can’t see worth—” He squinted at the aslant door and his voice went sharp. “Where’s Gode?”

Nothing moved in the dark corridor beyond the door, though anything could have lain in the blackness. Rand wasn’t about to put his head into the hall to find out for sure. The men guarding the window seemed to be gone, too. The night was empty out there. Others were up and about, though. Rand’s hearing was beginning to return, and he heard confused shouts from upstairs, and the pounding of running feet.

“Let’s go, al’ Thor,” Mat said, “while we still can.”

Mat really couldn’t see, though. Rand quickly separated their belongings from the rubble, then helped Mat get his haversack on. With one hand on Mat and the other holding his quarterstaff, Rand pulled and guided him through the gaping hole into the open night. Mat clutched Rand’s arm as he stumbled, his head pushed forward as though a couple of inches were the difference between sight and blindness.

As the first rain hit Rand’s face, lightning forked above the inn, and he stopped cold. Gode’s men were still there, lying with their feet toward the opening. They stared at the sky with open eyes as the rain pelted them relentlessly.

“What is it?” Mat asked. “What’s that smell? Gah, I can hardly see my own bloody hand!”

“Nothing,” Rand said. Shivering, he carefully guided Mat around the bodies. “Just the smell the lightning left behind.”

Rand stopped between lightning flashes, unable to see the bodies. He was less cautious once they got past the dead men, leading them on a stumbling run away from the inn. With Mat almost hanging on him, every stumble nearly pulled them both down, but Rand kept them upright, tottering and panting as they fled.

He looked back just once, before the rain thickened to a deafening curtain that blotted The Dancing Cartman from sight. Lightning silhouetted the figure of a man at the back of the inn, a man shaking his fist at them, or at the sky. Gode or Hake, he did not know, but it didn't really matter. Whoever it was, he was no friend of theirs. The rain was a deluge, isolating them in a wall of water. He hurried through the night, listening through the roar of the storm for the sound of pursuit.

Fever Talk

Dawn was still almost an hour away when Moiraine's horse galloped up to the makeshift camp and broke Nynaeve's light sleep. She was still sitting next to the fire—ashes and cold coals, now— with her knees drawn up under her chin and her arms wrapped around her legs. Before Nynaeve could wipe the sleep from her eyes, the Aes Sedai had leapt from her horse and ripped the blanket off of Lan.

Nynaeve stood and stretched as Moiraine inspected Lan. When the Aes Sedai didn't say so much as "Well met," Nynaeve's mouth went tight with annoyance. "He was wounded fighting the fade," she said. "I was able to stop the bleeding and treat the infection with herbs I brought with me from home. He had a fever, but it broke. I think he'll be fine now."

The Aes Sedai had one hand flat on Lan's chest and the other just under his navel. Her eyes were closed, but Nynaeve could almost see or feel what she was doing. *The Power*.

Moiraine exhaled and opened her eyes. "Your herbs did nothing for him, Wisdom."

"But how could— that's not—" Nynaeve started. She took a breath and tried to control her anger. "You didn't see him. You don't know. He was *sick*. I thought he might die."

"Oh yes, I am sure he would have," Moiraine said, standing back up. "You misunderstand. I did not say *you* did nothing for him. I said your herbs. No, I am quite sure you saved him. I can feel it when I Delve him. Lan's

wounds are from blades forged in the caves of Shayol Ghul. They are tainted, carrying an infection no medicine can cure.”

“Then how— ”

“Only the One Power can heal such wounds. You are unskilled, untrained, unable to touch the True Source except at random. But when you do touch it, you have a crude control, enough to heal Lan here.”

Nynaeve’s eyes went wide. “That— that’s mad,” she said, laughing. She had never touched the One Power. She had never even *tried*. Why would she? Who would want anything to do with the foul filth that had broken the world, that had twisted the Aes Sedai until they almost freed the Dark One? “You’re raving. You’d as well say I was born to a trolloc and raised by a wolf.”

“Girl,” Moiraine said, “I suspected as much before I ever met you. I became certain as soon as our paths crossed. I cannot stand face-to-face with a woman who can channel without knowing it. It comes with the ability. Even you can do it, untrained as you are. How did you know, so certainly, that Egwene had such potential?”

“How do you know I— ” Egwene *was* special; Nynaeve had always known she would make a fine Wisdom. But that didn’t have anything to do with the One Power. “That’s ridiculous, that is. I knew because she’s smart, strong willed, she has a presence you’d have to be blind not to see.”

Moiraine’s lips curled in a smile almost too small to see. “The people of Emond’s Field are very friendly. Not altogether trusting of those from outside, but friendly and hospitable. They were happy to talk. Most of their talk was not happy, though. It was about the struggling crops, the unending cold, the wolves. More than one told me how upset the Wisdom was that she had not predicted the hard winter and the lateness of spring. She was so good at foretelling weather, they told me. So good at telling the crops. Her cures were so wonderful, and sometimes she healed injuries all thought to be crippling so that they barely left a scar, and not a limp or a twinge. The only ill any spoke of you was that you were too young for the responsibility,

and only a few said that. I was not surprised, though. One with the talents they described, she would be most like to show such skill at a young age.”

“Mistress Barran taught me well.” Nynaeve’s mind was racing. Even Mistress Barran had not understood how some of Nynaeve’s treatments had worked so well— much better than they should have. And Nynaeve had always known when the medicine would work beyond expectations, always felt the certainty when she said the crops would be especially good, or that the rains would come early or late. That was the way she thought it was supposed to be. Not all Wisdoms could listen to the wind, but the best could. That was what Mistress Barran always said, just as she said Nynaeve would be one of the best. “She taught me well. Everyone knows she was one of the— wait. Who said I was too young?”

Moiraine smiled but ignored the question. “Unlike most women who claim to listen to the wind, you actually can. Sometimes. Of course, it has nothing to do with the wind. It is of Air and Water. It is not something you needed to be taught; it was born into you, just as it was born into Egwene. Just as it was born into me. I knew it within moments of meeting you. Do you remember when we first met, how I asked you if you were the Wisdom? How do you think I made that guess? There was nothing to distinguish you from any other young woman getting ready for your Bel Tine. And even knowing the Wisdom was young, I expected someone half again your age.”

Nynaeve remembered that meeting all too well; this woman, more self-possessed than anyone in the Women’s Circle, in a dress more beautiful than any she had ever seen, addressing her as a child. Then Moiraine had suddenly blinked as if surprised and out of a clear sky asked...

Nynaeve licked her lips, which suddenly felt quite dry. Her whole mouth did. She smacked her tongue on the roof of her mouth. “Th-that’s not possible. I would know. You are trying to trick me. It won’t work. I— ”

“Of course you do not know,” Moiraine said. “Why should you even suspect? And even if you did, you would as soon announce to all of Emond’s Field that you were a darkfriend as admit to yourself, even in the

deepest recesses of your mind, that you have anything to do with the One Power, or the dreaded Aes Sedai.” Moiraine flashed her tiny smile again. “But I can tell you how it began.”

“No— No more of your lies. I’ll hear none of it.”

“Perhaps as much as eight or ten years ago— the age varies, but it always comes young— there was something you wanted desperately, something you *needed*. A branch suddenly falling where you could pull yourself out of a pond instead of drowning. A friend, or a pet, getting well when everyone thought they would die. And you got it.

“You felt nothing special at the time, but a week later, maybe ten days, you had your first reaction to touching the True Source. Perhaps fever and chills that came on suddenly and put you to bed, then disappeared after only a few hours. None of the reactions, and they vary, lasts more than a few hours. Headaches and numbness and exhilaration all mixed together, and you taking foolish chances or acting giddy. A spell of dizziness, when you tripped and stumbled whenever you tried to move, when you could not say a sentence without your tongue mangling half the words. There are others. Do you remember?”

Nynaeve sat down hard on the ground; her legs would not hold her up. She remembered, but she shook her head anyway. It had to be coincidence. Or else Moiraine had asked more questions in Emond’s Field than she had thought. The Aes Sedai *had* asked a great many questions.

“Do you remember?” Moiraine asked again.

Nynaeve shook her head again, but this time she spoke. She aimed her words at the ground; she couldn’t look the Aes Sedai in the eye. “I had just been made apprentice to Mistress Barran when a flu caught hold of Emond’s Field. Many people took ill, but nothing serious, except for the Coplin girl, Edelle. Her flu turned into breakbone fever, so the Wisdom set me to watch her while she tended to others. It’s terrible to watch, breakbone fever. The child was soaked with sweat, groaning and twisting until I was certain the bones *would* break. The poor girl must have been six, seven

years old. I was maybe twice that, still young myself. I didn't know the Wisdom had everything well in hand. When she told me the fever would break in another day, two at the most, I thought she was doing me a kindness. The girl was dying, and I was going to have to watch it. But she didn't die. When Mistress Barran came back an hour later, the fever had broken. She was surprised, she was, but what Wisdom ever complained about someone getting better? Not one, and she didn't complain when the terrible fever and vomiting that took me after lunch a week later was gone by suppertime, either."

Nynaeve dropped her head in her hands as she finished speaking. She remembered that fever. It had come out of nowhere— by then, no one was still ill with the flu. She had been so scared, shivering on the floor, waiting for Mistress Barran to find her. She would have looked for the Wisdom herself, but the stabbing pains in her stomach wouldn't let her crawl, much less get up and leave the house. She hadn't seen Uncle Idris in two or three days, which usually meant he was passed out drunk in a whore's bed in Taren Ferry. Nynaeve remembered wondering if anyone would come looking for her, wondering how long it would be before someone would notice she was gone. In fact, it didn't take long at all for Mistress Barran to come looking. She had bundled Nynaeve into bed, seeming much more worried than she had about Edelle Coplin. *Probably because she could see no reason for my illness. Why would she? It was the filthy Power.*

"You were very lucky," Moiraine said. Nynaeve lifted her head. Lan was sitting up now, looking as good as new, except for the scars covering him everywhere.

"Lucky?! Don't taunt me, Aes Sedai."

"As I said, you have managed a crude control over the Power, even if you cannot touch the True Source at will. If you had not, it would have killed you eventually. As it will, in all probability, kill Egwene if you manage to stop her from going to Tar Valon."

“Even if what you say is true, then Egwene has no more need to go to Tar Valon than I did. Leave her— leave *all* of us— out of your intrigues.”

Moiraine shook her head slowly. “My sisters and I search for girls like you and Egwene, girls who can touch the True Source unguided, as thoroughly and carefully as we search for men who can do the same. It is not a desire to increase our numbers— or at least, not only that. Nor is it a fear that those women will misuse the Power. The rough control of the Power they may gain is rarely enough to do any great damage, especially since the actual touching of the Source is beyond their control without a teacher, and comes only randomly. And, of course, they do not suffer the madness that drives men to evil or twisted things. No, we search because we want to save their lives. The lives of those who never do manage any control at all.”

“Nonsense,” Nynaeve said. “The fever and chills I had couldn’t kill anyone. Not in three or four hours. I had some of those other things, too, and they couldn’t kill anybody, either. And they stopped after a few months.”

“Those were only reactions,” Moiraine said. “Each time, the reaction comes closer to the actual touching of the Source, until the two happen almost together. After that, the girl will notice no more reactions, but the hourglass has been tipped. A year. Two. I know one woman who lasted five years. Of four who have the inborn ability that you and Egwene have, three die if we do not find them and train them. It is not as horrible a death as the men die, but neither is it pretty, if any death can be called so. Convulsions. Screaming. It takes days, and once it begins there is nothing that can be done to stop it, not by all the Aes Sedai in Tar Valon together.”

“Y-you’re lying. All those questions you asked in Emond’s Field. You found out about Edelle Coplin, about my fever and pains, all of it. You—you made all of this up.”

“You know I did not,” Moiraine said quietly.

Nynaeve wanted to shake her head again, but she didn’t have it in her. Reluctantly, she nodded. It was no good denying what was plain. Mistress Barran’s first apprentice had died the way the Aes Sedai said when Nynaeve

was still playing with dolls, and there had been a young woman in Deven Ride only a few years ago. She had been a Wisdom's apprentice, too, one who could listen to the wind.

"You have great potential, I think," Moiraine said. "With training you might become even more powerful than Egwene, and I believe she can become one of the strongest Aes Sedai we have seen in centuries. But none of this matters until and unless we find the children. We should be on our way. Perhaps we will speak more about this as we go." She turned to the warder. "Are you ready, Lan? Dawn is nigh."

"Aye," the warder said. "Let us away."

He stood and quickly broke down the rough camp Nynaeve had made for them. Nynaeve did not stand. She sat, dumbfounded and confused, staring ahead blankly. After a minute or two, Lan walked up to her with Clover in tow.

"Wisdom," he said. She looked up; he was extending his hand to help her up. She took it and stood, looking him in the eye but still feeling unfocused. He clasped his other hand on top of hers. "Thank you," he said, his voice as close to warm as she had yet heard it. He let her hands go and walked back to his horse.

"Come, Wisdom," the Aes Sedai said, turning her horse away from camp and toward the road. "That boat grows no closer."

Nynaeve mounted her mare and followed the Aes Sedai and the warder to the road. As they started their day's journey, she looked at the sun beginning to creep over the horizon. In less than an hour, Nynaeve's whole world had been turned on its head—and nothing would ever be the same again.

Words from the Waste

It wasn't much, just some scratching or shuffling outside, but the sound was enough to rouse Egwene from a fitful sleep and make her sit up in bed. She was in Ila and Raen's wagon, but it looked like only Ila was there, sleeping soundly. Raen was gone. Perrin and Elyas had to be the ones making the noise. They spent each night sleeping near the embers of the evening fire. At least Perrin did. Egwene was never sure exactly where Elyas went or what he did when she wasn't around.

Doubtful that any real sleep was coming now, she got up and crept out to see what Perrin and Elyas were up to at this hour. When she stepped out of the wagon, she found the fire rekindled and Perrin, Elyas, and Raen all sitting round it. Elyas and Raen were lighting and tamping and relighting their pipes, the tabac smoke mixing with that from the campfire and drifting up toward the stars.

"Egwene," Perrin said, "did we wake you?"

"The Mahdi is about to tell us a tale, lass," said Elyas. "Gather round."

Egwene sat next to Perrin and held her hands to the fire.

"We figured, if we aim to tell stories," Perrin said, "we well's to have a fire while we told them."

Still half asleep, Egwene rubbed her hands together and then wrapped her arms around her knees, soaking in the heat from the fire. After a moment she realized that no one was telling any stories. They were just chewing

thoughtfully at their pipes, or staring into the flickering flames. “Don’t mind me, boys,” she said with a yawn. “I’m just here for the fire.”

“Well, then,” Raen said, chuckling softly. “Tell me, Elyas, have you visited any of the People since you were with us last spring?”

“No,” Elyas said, chewing on his pipestem. “You know how I feel about being around too many people at once.”

Raen smiled. “Especially people whose ways are so opposite your own, eh? Well, such is your way. I still like our Way better, but this is nothing. I ask because the story I am about to tell you, I find it fascinating, and I have heard it again and again, every time we meet others of the People. I thought, perhaps if you’d visited with any, but you haven’t.”

“No,” Elyas said.

“Well, it begins in the spring two years ago, with a band of the People who were crossing the Waste by the northern route.”

“The Waste?” Perrin said. “The Aiel Waste? They were crossing the Aiel Waste?”

Egwene was just as surprised as Perrin. No one went into the Aiel Waste. Except Aiel, of course.

“Some can enter the Waste without being bothered,” Elyas said. “Gleemen. Peddlers, if they’re honest. The Tuatha’an cross the Waste all the time. Merchants from Cairhien used to, before the Tree, and the Aiel War.”

“The Aielmen avoid us,” Raen said, “though many of us have tried to speak with them. They watch us from a distance, but they don’t come near us, nor let us come near them. Sometimes I worry that they might know the song, though I suppose it isn’t likely.” He puffed on his pipe a few times. “Among Aiel, men do not sing, you know. Isn’t that strange? From the time an Aiel boy becomes a man he will not sing anything but battle chants, or their

dirge for the slain. I have heard them singing over their dead, and over those they have killed. That is a song to make the stones weep.”

“But why would you go into the Waste?” Perrin asked. “You run from danger but go into the Aiel Waste? What kind of sense does that make?”

Egwene had to admit, it was a fair question. From what she had heard, only the mad would try crossing the Waste.

But Raen just shook his head. “You still do not understand,” he said. “We avoid *violence*, not danger. And the Aiel, whatever they may be with Andorans, or Tairens, or Cairhienin, they are not violent with the Tuatha’ an.”

Perrin just shook his head, mouth hanging open.

“If this is about the songs Aiel sing or don’t sing—” Elyas started.

“No, friend,” Raen said, “not any song. I am not sure I know what it is about.” He turned to Egwene and Perrin. “Young Aiel often travel into the Blight. Some of the young men go alone, thinking for some reason that they have been called to kill the Dark One. Most go in small groups to hunt trollocs. Two years ago, a band of the People crossing the Waste about a hundred miles south of the Blight found one of these groups. *Far Dareis Mai*.”

Elyas turned to the two Emond’s Fielders. “Aiel girls don’t have to tend house and cook if they don’t want to,” he said. “The ones who want to be warriors, instead, join one of the warrior societies, *Far Dareis Mai*, the Maidens of the Spear, and fight right alongside the men.”

Egwene’s eyes went wide, then she smiled. When she looked at Perrin, though, he was stunned silent, his jaw hanging low enough that a woodpecker could have cleaned his teeth for him, all the way back to the molars. She rolled her eyes. *He’s really going to need to learn not to be surprised when others do things differently than they do back home.* She elbowed him in the side, and Elyas chuckled.

“As I say, this Band of the People had set up camp for the night. They were dancing and singing and laughing, as we do, when a woman comes crawling through the sand toward their fires. She was hurt badly, mortally, as it happens, but found the strength to crawl. Some Tuatha’an followed the trail of her blood, looking to see if she had any others with her, anyone who needed help, but her comrades were all dead, as were three times their number in trollocs.”

Elyas sat up and ripped his pipe from between his teeth. “Impossible. A hundred miles into the Waste? *Djevik K’Shar*, that’s what trollocs call the Waste: the Dying Ground. They wouldn’t go a hundred miles into the Waste if all the myrddraal in the Blight were driving them.”

“Well, it seems they followed the Aiel back from the Blight. The Aiel’s trophies made it plain that they were returning from that loathsome place. Well, after a hundred miles, the trollocs finally caught up to the Aiel, or else the Aiel finally discovered their pursuers. Whatever the spark, the fire of violence consumed both parties. With so many trollocs dead, I would be surprised if more than a handful survived to tell the tale. Of the Aiel, only one escaped, this girl, crawling toward the People’s fires. She would not let anyone touch her, even to tend her wounds. They say she knew they were Tuatha’an. Even through the pain, they saw the loathing in her eyes. Still, though, she crawled to us as she died. So important was her message.

“She would not let anyone touch her, but she seized the Seeker of that band by his coat, and this is what she said, word for word:

Leafblighter means to seize the Eye of the World, Lost One. It means to slay the dragon before it has hatched. What happens if the Eye opens and sees naught but Sightburner? Warn the People, Lost One. Tell them to stand ready for He Who Comes with the Dawn. Tell them...

“And then she died. Leafblighter and Sightburner are Aiel names for the Dark One, but I don’t understand another word of it. Yet she thought it important enough to approach those she obviously despised, to pass it on

with her last breath. But to whom? We are ourselves ‘the People,’ but I hardly think she meant it for us. The Aiel? They would not let us tell them if we tried.” He sighed. “She called *us* the Lost. So we call those of the People who cannot follow the Way. Those who leave to live in the villages. To her, *we* are the Lost. I think they truly hate us.”

“Something they learned in the Blight,” Elyas said, puffing on his pipe, “but none of it makes sense. Slay the dragon before it has hatched? The only Dragon I know is three thousand years dead already. And what is the Eye of the World? Does the Dark One mean to steal it? Who has it now? A lot of good the message does if no one understands it. Could she have been babbling, Raen? At the end of their strength, people often lose their grip on what’s real. Some don’t even know who they’re speaking to.”

“She knew what she was saying, and to whom she was saying it. Something more important to her than her own life, and we cannot even understand it. When I saw you walking into our camp, I thought perhaps we would find the answer at last, since you were”—Elyas made a quick motion with his hand, and Raen changed what he had been going to say— “*are* a friend, and know many strange things. Then with young Perrin’s dream...”

“I know many things, Mahdi, but not about this,” Elyas said. Raen turned to Perrin but Perrin didn’t say anything. They could hear bits of the music and laughter drifting from other parts of the camp, parts that had yet to go to sleep.

“Perrin,” Egwene finally said, “what dream?”

Perrin looked at her blankly for a moment. “I— I don’t really remember it. I know at the end a bird attacked me, it— it pecked at my eye, tore it clean out. When I woke up, I said something about the Eye of the World, but I don’t remember anything about that from my dream.”

Egwene squinted and studied Perrin. He was holding something back, but she didn’t know what, and she didn’t want to ask about it in front of others. *Can Elyas tell? He knew when we lied that first night. But the wolves aren’t*

here. They were the ones who told him. Egwene shook her head. She was living in a gleeman's tale, for true.

The door to the wagon opened and Ila looked out at them. "That's enough stories for one night. Spin your next tale tomorrow. Raen, dear, come to bed. And you as well, Egwene."

Raen smiled and gave them all a shrug, then stood up and put dirt on the fire. He and Egwene went to the wagon, and Perrin and Elyas stayed outside. She had initially suggested that they rotate nights in the wagon, but they insisted on sleeping in the open. *Men. Always trying to prove themselves tough and hardy.*

She lay her head down and fell into a deep sleep, wondering what by Birgitte's bow the Eye of the World was.



The others had all retired and only Elyas and Perrin were left outside. Perrin was about to crawl into his blanketroll when Elyas grabbed him by the arm.

"Don't get too comfortable," Elyas said. "That dream of yours was a sign. I can feel it in my marrow, same as when I said we should stay. I don't know what you left out when Egwene asked about it— and don't bother pretending with me, boy— but I know it's time to go. We leave at sunup." He let go of Perrin's arm and walked briskly over to his own blanketroll.

It was only an hour till sunup. Perrin spent the time looking up at the sky, anxiously watching for the first signs of dawn. They were leaving. He felt the relief of the wolves. *Elyas must have told them.* Then he felt what was underneath that relief— anger, hatred, vengeance. He got bits of scent, of sounds, of sights, and he knew for certain what he had suspected in the dream: the wolf that died in that world had died in this one, too. He swallowed an urge to howl. *I'm not a bloody wolf. I'm a person. I'm a*

downcountry blacksmith. I have nothing of the Dark One in me, and nothing it could want. But he *felt* like a wolf, or felt *for* them. He felt for them in his body, in his bones. When he rejected the feelings, it was like rejecting himself. But he couldn't accept them.

At the first hint of light from the east, Perrin scrambled out of his blankets. Before he had bundled his blanketroll, Raen came out of his wagon, rubbing sleep from his eyes. He looked up at the sky and froze halfway down the steps, his hands still raised to his face. Only his eyes moved as he studied the sky. Perrin looked too, but saw nothing but the pink of the coming dawn on the bellies of a few clouds in the east. Raen seemed to listen, too, and smell the air, but there was no sound except the wind in the trees and no smell but the faint smoky remnant of last night's campfires.

Elyas appeared from the wood, leading Bela and with his own belongings packed.

"We must change the direction we travel, my old friend," Raen said. He looked at the sky again. "We go another way this day. Will you be coming with us?" Elyas shook his head, and Raen nodded. "Well, take care. There is something about today..." He started to look up once more, but pulled his eyes back down before they rose above the wagon tops. "I think the wagons will go east. Perhaps all the way to the Spine of the World. Perhaps we'll find a *stedding*, and stay there awhile."

"Trouble never enters the *stedding*," Elyas said with a nod. "But the ogier are none too open to strangers."

"Everyone is open to the Traveling People," Raen said, grinning. "Besides, even ogier have pots and things that need mending. Come, let us have some breakfast, and we'll talk about it."

"No time," Elyas said. "We move on today, too, as soon as possible. It's a day for moving, it seems."

Raen tried to convince them to stay for breakfast at least, and when Ila appeared from the wagon with Egwene, she joined her voice to Raen's. She

did not really mean it, though. She said all of the right words, but she was stiff-like, and it was plain to Perrin she'd be glad to see Elyas's back, if not Egwene's.

"What's all this, then?" Egwene asked, yawning as she looked at Perrin's and Elyas's packs, and Bela standing there, ready to go.

"It's time to leave," Elyas said. "We go in a different direction than the People today."

Perrin expected Egwene to object, to want to stay with the Tinkers, but she just nodded thoughtfully and hurried back into the wagon to gather her things.

Raen and Elyas went back and forth a few more times before the Mahdi threw up his hands. "Alright. I don't know that I've ever let a visitor leave this camp without sharing a meal, but..." He looked up again. "Well, we need an early start ourselves, I think. Perhaps we will eat as we journey. But at least let everyone say goodbye."

Elyas started to protest, but Raen was already hurrying from wagon to wagon, pounding on the doors where there was no one awake. Before long the whole camp had turned out, even the big dogs with their tongues lolling out of their mouths, looking not the least bit dangerous. Then it was handshake after handshake and hug after hug. Some of the girls' hugs almost made Perrin want to stay. Almost.

Aram drew Egwene to the side to talk. Perrin couldn't hear what he was saying, but Egwene kept shaking her head— slowly at first, then more firmly as he went from talking, to pleading, and then to arguing. Egwene kept shaking her head until Ila rescued her with a few sharp words. Aram's face twisted in a scowl as he pushed his way through the crowd, abandoning the rest of the farewell. Ila watched him go, looking like she might call him back but saying nothing. *She's relieved. Relieved he doesn't want to go with us— with Egwene.*

When the hugs and handshakes were over, the crowd opened a little space around Raen, Ila, and the three visitors.

“You came in peace,” Raen said, bowing formally, hands on his chest. “Depart now in peace. Always will our fires welcome you, in peace. The Way of the Leaf is peace.”

“Peace be on you always,” Elyas said, “and on all the People.” He paused a moment, then added, “I will find the song, or another will find the song, but the song will be sung, this year or in a year to come. As it once was, so shall it be again, world without end.”

Raen blinked, then turned to Ila. They both looked shocked, dumbfounded, but all the other Tuatha’ an murmured in reply, “World without end. World and time without end.” When the surprise wore off, Raen and his wife hurriedly said the same.

After a few last farewells, they walked away from the Traveling People. Raen walked with them as far as the edge of the trees, a pair of the dogs cavorting by his side.

“Truly, my old friend, you must take great care. This day... There is wickedness loose in the world, I fear, and whatever you pretend, you are not so wicked that it will not swallow you whole.”

“Peace be on you, Mahdi,” Elyas said.

“And on you,” Raen said, sounding tired and sad.

When Raen was gone, Perrin and Egwene just stared at Elyas until he scowled and started walking. “So I don’t believe in their fool song,” he said. “No need to make them feel bad by messing up their ceremony, was there? I told you: they set a store by ceremony sometimes.”

“Of course,” Egwene said with a crooked smile. “No need at all.”

Dapple, Wind, and Hopper came to greet Elyas. Perrin caught some of what passed between them. *Fire eyes. Pain. Heartfang. Death. Heartfang.* They meant the Dark One. They were telling about his dream. ***Our dream, I suppose.*** After a moment the wolves ranged out ahead to scout the way. Elyas looked at him but didn't say anything.

Perrin thought about the dream, remembered the sweet stench of the wolf's hair and flesh burning, the screams of agony that still echoed in his mind. He had thought that the wolves were safe, that they made *him* safe. *Always danger. Never safe. But better to run on four legs. Full heart is safer. Full mind is safer.*

The voices in his mind were loud and insistent, and more than he could make sense of at the moment. He pushed back at them, tried to shut them out, and blinked in surprise when it worked. He determined not to let them back in again. *Even in dreams?* He was not sure if the thought was his or theirs.

The Smell of Char, the Smell of a Halfman

It really was a wonder. Less than a mile downriver, the White Bridge gleamed with white light like it was carved from the sun itself. A relic of a lost age, it had been no more real to Nynaeve than trollocs or halfmen a scant month earlier. *Before you know it I'll be practicing the bow with Birgitte.* Of course, to look at the Aes Sedai and warder, you would never know anything out of the ordinary lay ahead. Not wanting to seem the country fool so easily amused and fascinated, Nynaeve joined in the other two's silence as they closed the distance to the fabled White Bridge.

It wasn't as if that constituted a change that either of them would have noticed. Since the night that the halfmen attacked, Nynaeve had kept to herself and avoided conversation. As quiet as she was outwardly, within she was all clamor and noise. She was the Wisdom. Her entire life was dedicated to helping her people lead clean and healthy and decent lives. But she was also a... *channeler*. She had touched the One Power, the Power that the Dragon had wielded when he broke the world. She had used that filth to heal and to know the weather and predict the crops— used it to *be* Wisdom. What was she to make of that?

Mostly she couldn't make heads or tails of it. But sometimes she caught herself thinking of what she could do as Wisdom with the One Power, used intentionally— not unknowingly and by accident. When she did, a loud anger swallowed up her daydreams. *The Power is a foul thing. I'll have naught to do with it.* She thought of Egwene and Mat Cauthon and the other boys. *Unless I must.*

Of course, the little conversation the Aes Sedai tried to make with her was all about taking Nynaeve to Tar Valon for training. The only thing that mattered was finding the children, and the woman wanted to waste time talking about going to Tar Valon, as if Nynaeve had not made it perfectly plain that she had no intention of doing so. And when her bad humor showed, Moiraine would smile and say, “Part of the training you will receive in Tar Valon, Wisdom, will teach you to control your temper. You can do nothing with the One Power when emotion rules your mind.” It was maddening.

But now they were at the foot of the White Bridge. Soon they would finally learn something substantive, something based on more than the Aes Sedai *feelings*, something from the people in a town that some of the children had been through, or were possibly still in. The pale arch of the White Bridge shone in the sunlight, a milky spiderweb too delicate to stand, sweeping across the Arinelle. It looked like a sculpture of fire and ice so delicate that the weight of a single child would bring it crashing down. Surely it would collapse under its own weight any minute.

Lan and Moiraine rode ahead casually, up the gleaming white approach and onto the bridge. The surface certainly looked as slick as glass— wet glass— but it gave the horses a firm, sure footing, and their hooves rang out like steel on steel.

Nynaeve watched until they were almost a quarter of the way across, then made herself follow. Even seeing the Aes Sedai and warder crossing without incident, she still half waited for the entire thing to shatter beneath them. *If lace were made of glass, it would look like this.* It was not until they were nearly to the other side that Nynaeve noticed the tarry smell of char thickening the air, her first hint of the destruction she was about to see.

At the foot of the bridge was a square where piles of blackened timbers, still leaking smoky threads, stood in the place of half a dozen buildings. Men in poorly fitting red uniforms and tarnished armor patrolled the streets, but they marched quickly with their eyes more shifting than searching, looking over their shoulders as they went. *They’ll find nothing, which is exactly as*

they wish it. The few townspeople out on the streets fair ran wherever they went, shoulders hunched as if expecting to be caught from behind at any moment.

Lan looked grimmer than usual, and even the soldiers steered wide when they saw him. He sniffed the air and grimaced, growling under his breath. It was little wonder, with the stink of fire so strong. *It's like Emond's Field on Bel Tine morning.* Moiraine pulled them up short and then was off her horse in an instant. She spoke to townsfolk as they went about their business. She asked no questions, but offered sympathy. To Nynaeve's surprise, it appeared genuine. People who shied away from Lan or ignored Nynaeve stopped to speak with Moiraine. They even seemed to open up, after a fashion, under Moiraine's clear gaze and calm voice. The Aes Sedai's eyes, usually so inscrutable, seemed now to openly share the people's hurt, to empathize with their confusion.

They still lied, though. Most of them. Some denied there had been any trouble at all. *No one would believe that. As well say we were in a blizzard.* Moiraine mentioned the burned buildings all around the square. Still they insisted that everything was fine, simply staring past what they didn't want to see.

"Oh that's nothing," one fat fellow said. "That was just a lamp turned over in the butcher's shop, what spread in the wind afore a thing could be done." He spoke with a hollow sort of cheer, and wore a grin that kept slipping. Nynaeve looked more closely at the charred buildings. No two stood next to one another.

It seemed everyone they talked to had a different story. Several women, their voices low as if they shared in a secret plot, let them know the truth of the matter— a man somewhere in the town was meddling with the One Power. It was time to have the Aes Sedai in; past time, was the way they saw it, no matter what the men said about Tar Valon. Let the Red Ajah settle matters.

One man claimed it had been an attack by bandits, and another said a riot by darkfriends. “Those ones going to see the false Dragon, you know,” he said. “They’re all over the place. Darkfriends, every one.”

Some said the trouble had come on a boat from upriver. Nynaeve thought this most plausible, since it was how they expected two of the boys had come, and it was laughable to suppose that the boys and the trouble were unrelated. She also found it believable because of what they heard from the one man who seemed to let something slip, to say something unguarded. “We showed them,” the narrow-faced man said, scrubbing his hand together nervously. “Let them keep that kind of thing in the Borderlands, where it belongs. We went down to the docks and—” He cut off with a click of his teeth. Without another word he scurried off, peering back over his shoulder at them as if they might give chase.

The boat had gotten away—that much was clear, eventually, from others—cutting its moorings and fleeing downriver only the day before while a mob poured onto the docks. *Egwene, were you on board? Are you watching over those fool boys?* One woman said that a gleeman had been on the boat. That cinched it for Nynaeve.

“That must have been Thom Merrilin,” she said to Moiraine after the woman had moved on. “I’ll bet at least some of the children were on that boat. We must continue downriver. Time is getting no longer.”

The Aes Sedai listened patiently, nodding, until she was done. “Perhaps,” she said, but she sounded doubtful. Then she made off without another word, heading across the square. Nynaeve caught her up at the door to an inn. Inside, a shoulder-high wall split the common room in two. Moiraine took a table on the near side of the wall, and they ordered a meal for the three of them. They ate in silence, and Nynaeve found the fare far less satisfying than she had hoped of their first properly cooked meal in many days.

They were not the only ones eating in silence; no one seemed to say a word, on either side of the shoulder-high wall. The handful of patrons

concentrated on their own plates and their own thoughts. The innkeeper, though, seemed to speak constantly as he dusted tables with a corner of his apron, but his words were just mutterings to himself, always too low to make out. *Even indoors, this town is heavy with fear.*

About the time they pushed their plates away, wiped clean with the last scraps of bread, one of the red-uniformed soldiers appeared in the doorway. He seemed quite splendid to Nynaeve, in his peaked helmet and burnished breastplate, a hand resting on the hilt of his sword and a stern look on his face.

Lan spared him one glance and snorted. "Militia. Useless."

The soldier looked over the room, then let his eyes come to rest on the three of them. He hesitated, then took a deep breath before walking over and demanding to know who they were, what their business was in Whitebridge, and how long they intended to stay.

"We are leaving as soon as I finish my ale," Lan said. He took another slow swallow before looking up at the soldier. "The Light illumine good Queen Morgase."

The militiaman opened his mouth, then took a good look at Lan's eyes and stepped back. Nynaeve couldn't help but smile, as often as those icy eyes had done the same to her. But the man caught himself right off, and for a moment Nynaeve feared he would do something foolish to keep from looking the coward in front of two women. Men so often made asses of themselves in just that way. But, like everyone else she had seen in Whitebridge, the militiaman found his mettle wanting. Instead he just gave a small nod. "See that you do. Too many strangers around these days for the good of the Queen's peace." Turning on his heel he stomped out again. None of the locals seemed to notice.

"And when you do finish that ale?" she asked the warder. The mood in the room was such that she kept her voice low, but she made sure it was firm, too. "We're going after the boat, I trust."

Lan looked at Moiraine, who shook her head slightly and said, “First I must find the one I can be sure of finding, and at present he is somewhere to the north of us. I do not think the other two went with the boat in any case. I would guess they were in this room not more than two days ago. The last echoes of the bond are fading away now. I hear these reverberations only because they were deathly scared when they left here. Alive, but very afraid. No, the boys definitely got off the boat, and I do not think they got back on.”

“Which two were here?” Nynaeve leaned over the table intently. “Do you know? Are you sure there were *two*? If they’re only a day or two ahead, why don’t we go after them first?”

“I know they were here, both of them,” Moiraine said, “but beyond that I cannot say. I do not know if they went east or north or south. I trust they are smart enough to have gone east, toward Caemlyn, but I am not sure. In two days they could have gone twenty miles, or forty, in any direction. Fear can inspire great speed, and they were certainly afraid when they left here.”

“But— ”

“Wisdom, however fearful they were, in whatever direction they ran, eventually they will remember Caemlyn, and it is there that we will find them. But I will help the one I can find now, first.”

Nynaeve opened her mouth again, but Lan spoke before she could. “They had reason to be afraid,” he said softly. He looked around, then lowered his voice further. “There was a halfman here. I can still smell it everywhere.”

Moiraine sighed. “I will keep hope until I know it is gone. I refuse to believe the Dark One can win so easily. I will find all three of them alive and well. I must believe it.”

“I want to find the boys, too,” Nynaeve said, “but what about Egwene? You never even mention her, and you ignore me when I ask. I thought you were going to take her off to”— she glanced at the other tables, and lowered her voice— “to your sisters.”

The Aes Sedai studied the tabletop for a moment before raising her eyes. When she did, they did not have the flat coolness Nynaeve had come to expect. Instead they sparkled— they fair *glowed*— with a flash of anger. But when she spoke, her voice was ice. Nynaeve fancied she saw the air from the Aes Sedai's mouth turn to fog. "I hope to find Egwene alive and well, too. I do not easily give up young women with that much ability once I have found them. But it will be as the Wheel weaves, and you will not change that any more than I will."

They finished their meal in silence, and in silence they who rode through Whitebridge's eastern gates and down the Caemlyn Road. Moiraine's eyes searched the horizon to the northeast. Nynaeve's eyes searched within herself. *What if I can't save them all? What if the Aes Sedai's hope is a false one?* She felt anger rising in her chest. She'd spent more than enough of her life feeling powerless, but that sense of impotence had touched her only rarely since she'd become Wisdom. Until Winternight, at least. Since then?

Nynaeve kicked Clover; she was falling behind. Behind them, the smoke-stained town of Whitebridge cowered.

The End of the Road

It was a hard, black rain, and Mat couldn't see a thing. He had ahold of al'Thor's cloak, and tried to keep pace and his balance as he followed close behind.

A flash of bright, painful white suddenly filled Mat's entire head. It felt like a frozen burning on the back side of his eyes. He stumbled and nearly lost his grip on al'Thor's cloak. He fell to a knee briefly, but was already regaining his balance when the sky let out a crack and a roar. The flash was gone near as soon as it came, but Mat's vision didn't clear up. It merely went from a wall of white, to a white wall with black spots floating on it like beads of oil dancing on water, and eventually to a wall of black.

"Al'Thor," he said. He had to shout to hear himself above the downpour. "Al'Thor, I think I'm blind. Don't see nothing but black, or white when the lightning comes. Naught else. Not a thing."

The queasiness and the tingling in Mat's fingers and toes signaled either joyous excitement or panic run riot, and he was a long way from joy, for true. He felt al'Thor stop just a half second before running into him. Mat lost his grip on the cloak when al'Thor turned to catch him and keep him from falling.

"Black, then white?" al'Thor said. "Good then. If the lightning shows white, your eyes are still working. They're just, you know, out of sorts. It'll be alright. Everything will be just—just give it a little bit."

Another blinding flash of lightning, and Mat could hardly hear the thunder above the roar of the rain.

“Well enough,” Mat said, though he found al’ Thor’s words scant reassurance. “Just a little bit.”

They went on as before, al’ Thor leading and Mat blind behind him, but it wasn’t five minutes before Mat stumbled again. This time he couldn’t steady himself before hitting the ground. His knee slammed down into a rock, and he scraped up the palm of his left hand trying to catch himself.

“Mat, we have to stop. We’ll get no further like this. You’ll break a leg, like as not.”

“No,” Mat said. “No, Gode could be—”

“Gode’s dead, Mat,” said al’ Thor. “No one came out of that lightning strike.”

“No one save us.”

“Save us.”

Al’ Thor led them to some bushes. Mat crawled carefully below them. The branches scratched up his face— not too badly, he hoped— and the few leaves offered less shelter than a good tree might. *Trees ain’t safe in this.* Another blinding flash of lightning, on cue.

He curled into a ball and barked a laugh or a sob; he wasn’t sure which. Al’ Thor lay beside him and covered them with a bedroll. Al’ Thor’s body brought a welcome warmth, and the oil-treated bedroll kept them drier than the bush alone.

“Al’ Thor?” he said. “You won’t..”

He felt al’ Thor wait for a beat before asking, “I won’t what?”

“Leave. You— you won’t leave. Will you? If I— if I can’t keep up. You won’t?” Mat hated the quaver in his own voice.

“I won’t leave.” Al’ Thor reached across his body to squeeze Mat’s shoulder. He held on for a moment, then said, “Whatever comes. We’ll find our way home from this nightmare, I promise.”

Mat felt a shiver. He couldn’t tell if it came from al’ Thor or from his own body. Before he could decide, he fell asleep.



Mat was back in Four Kings, but not as he remembered it. The town was empty except for him. The wagons were there, but no people, no horses, no dogs. Nothing alive. Nothing but the one stalking him. Someone was stalking him, he knew.

Something was wrong with his eyes. Everything directly in front of him he saw clearly, but to either side of him, all was blurred lines and water, like fogged glass. Buildings to his left and right were out of focus until he turned to face them; then he saw them just fine. He walked down the rutted street, buildings falling into a haze as they drifted further to the edges of his field of vision.

It felt as if only what he saw really existed, and only while he was looking at it. Everywhere else was nothing, a void, empty. Except for the pursuer. Mat didn’t see him— no matter where he turned, the pursuer remained behind him— but he knew the bugger was real. None of this made sense— indeed, it was plainly impossible— but it was true. Mat could feel it in his blood, his chest, his teeth.

The town was silent. He couldn’t hear his own footsteps, or his clothes rustling as he walked. He couldn’t hear the wind, though he felt it biting cold against his naked face. But he could hear every step his pursuer took. Not so much as a sound in his ears, but as a pressure building in the hollows of his face. Mat’s own pace quickened, and the glances over his shoulder grew more frequent. The silent sound in his face grew till it seemed like

thunder, like a storm, and he set to running. Buildings on either side moved quickly from sharp focus to indistinct fog, and the effect made him queasy.

One building ahead looked familiar, and Mat ran for it, hoping for safety. He stopped when he reached the door. He knew this place. *The Dancing Cartman*. He threw the door open and stepped inside. The common room was filled; every table had three men or more, and every other man had a girl on his knee. The men played cards and drank brown liquor. On stage, al' Thor was doing some tumbling, though it seemed no one was paying him any mind. The men drank and laughed and cursed, or it looked like they did. In here, too, all was silent.

When Mat closed the door behind him, the whole room turned to look at him. The pressure seemed like to burst his head open at any moment. He turned his head without thinking, but behind him was only the front door of the inn, closed shut. In the common room, everyone stared openly at Mat. He looked down. In his hands was his ruby dagger. When he looked back up, the entire room was standing, and he saw malice, violence, hate in every face. The pressure in Mat's head seemed to double. He didn't know what to fear more, the thing chasing him from behind or the room full of hostile, quiet men before him. Across the room, al' Thor kept tumbling. *He doesn't even see me*. Without thinking, Mat sprang forward.

Mat slashed and danced his way through the room. Everyone his dagger touched shrieked silently and died, shriveling and blackening before falling to the floor. None offered any resistance, and they all looked sad and harmless as they fell, but Mat never slowed down. He and the dagger made a straight line for the stage and the only person in the room he knew.

Al' Thor was still on stage when Mat got there. In fact he was still tumbling; he had never stopped, never looked at Mat. For some reason, Mat found this comforting. He started to smile, then heard a sound behind him.

After several minutes of pure silence, the soft creak of the door opening was shockingly loud. Mat ducked reflexively as he turned around. The door was still opening, and the person behind it was still hidden, but Mat nearly

forgot to notice. The room behind him was filled with corpses. He knew he had made a line from the door to where he stood now, but somehow he had slain every single person in the room. Everyone except al' Thor.

The door swung open, and in the doorway stood a handsome man dressed all in white— shirt, trousers, coat— with a plum scarf around his neck. His eyes were light, almost as if they were made of ice or glass.

“Væ’ alza,” Mat said.

The man started to smile when he saw Mat, but stopped as he took in the room full of dead men and women, and then the ruby-hilted dagger in Mat’s hand. Mat turned to al’ Thor, but he was gone. In his place stood Howal Gode at the edge of the stage, right in front of Mat. Mat knew him from his clothes— his silk and dark velvets— but he did not look as Mat remembered. His skin was charred black, with red showing through in places where it was cracked and oozing. His face was little more than a skull, teeth and gums showing through shriveled lips. Lidless eyes stared at Mat for a half second before Gode reached out and drove his bony fingers into Mat’s eyes, plucking them from his head and leaving him blind.



Mat screamed. He trashed himself awake. He threw the blanketroll aside and sat up in the pouring rain, branches scratching at his face.

“My eyes! That shit-eater took my eyes!”

He felt arms around him, pulling him close and burying his head in a man’s chest. Mat yelled more curses against the burned and blackened man who had stolen the eyes that he dreamt with.

“Ho, ho.” *Al’Thor’s voice.* “Ho, Mat. Easy.” *It’s al’Thor who’s holding me.* “Easy now. You’re alright. He can’t hurt us. No one has your eyes. He can’t

hurt us, now.” Mat was sobbing into al’ Thor’s chest now, making sounds that weren’t words, but weren’t without meaning, either.

Mat took deep breaths, as deep as he could manage. His sobs slowed, then trickled to a stop. He felt foolish for a second before falling into a dreamless sleep.



Mat woke again just before dawn. The downpour had stopped, and even the last drizzle was fading away. His head was on al’ Thor’s chest. The other boy had held him as he cried himself to sleep, and then through the night.

“Al’ Thor,” he said, lifting his head and trying to look around. He still saw little more than a vast emptiness, but here and there the darkness seemed to vary slightly. It never took any clear form or shape, but off in one direction — east, he reckoned— there was a hint of grey where everywhere else was black. “Feels like day’s nigh. Best be getting started.”

Al’ Thor woke slowly. He helped Mat get out from under the bush. Free from the dripping branches, Mat lifted his blind eyes to the dark, dry, endless sky.

They set off as they had tried the night before, al’ Thor leading the way and Mat holding onto his cloak. Despite the rain, the road was in decent shape, and al’ Thor led him true. Mat hardly stumbled at all. After a while, he was worrying less about the ground below him and more about the sky above. From the moment the sun topped the horizon, Mat was blind with light instead of dark. The dark was frightening— empty and mysterious. But the light... the light was *painful*.

It was midmorning when they came upon the next village. They were both hungry, but they got nothing to eat there. They didn’t even ask. Instead, al’ Thor led them around, through the woods and fields to the south.

“Fewer folks as see us, fewer as can tell Gode’s men,” al’ Thor explained.

But Gode’s dead. That makes them someone else’s men. And they were that all the time, weren’t they? Same as Gode. Mat shivered and tried to step carefully, as if walking more slowly would level the ground beneath them.

The detour cost them maybe half an hour, then they were back on the road. Another hour after that, a farmer gave them a ride in his half-empty hay cart. Al’ Thor talked to him; Mat couldn’t even tell where the man was. Al’ Thor helped Mat climb into the cart, where he felt his way to the corner and hid his eyes from the sky with his cloak.

Mat listened as al’ Thor, sitting up front, talked to Alpert Mull about his cows that run dry, his chickens that ain’t lay, his wagon that broke down, his crops that ain’t yield, and near every other thing that went wrong in the winter. Mat supposed the farmer was happy just having someone to talk to, until they reached his farm in the late afternoon.

“These is hard times for helping strangers. Ain’t know what you’re running from, ain’t want to. I’ve a wife, and five children. You understand? My family. Were I a good man...” Mull took a long pause. Mat heard some movement, and al’ Thor passed him some piece of cloth. It felt knitted. “Were I a good man, I’d offer more. These belong to my boys, but they have others.” He paused again. “You don’t know me, understand? It’s hard times.”

“We never even saw you,” al’ Thor said. “Thank you for the scarves, and the ride. You *are* a good man. Best we’ve met in days.”

With al’ Thor’s help, Mat got down from the cart. He called out a thanks when he heard the cart start moving, but the only answer the farmer gave was a “Hyah!” for his horse. Mat grabbed al’ Thor’s cloak and the two set off again.

It was slow going, even after they established a steady rhythm. In an hour, the whole world started to dim and the wind grew colder and stiffer.

“Is it dusk, then?” he asked. “Are we stopping soon?”

“We’ll stop when we’re someplace warmer,” al’ Thor said. “Gotta get you someplace warm.”

They didn’t find anyplace warm in the next ten minutes, nor in the next twenty. But about half an hour later, Rand pulled up short.

“What’s that, then?” Mat said after a minute.

“Lights up ahead,” said al’ Thor. “A whole village’s worth. Could be good. Or bad.”

Just then a wave of laughter rolled out from up ahead.

“An inn,” said al’ Thor. “Looks to be the only one in the village, near as I can tell from here.”

“Does it— does it look safe?” *They’ll be waiting. They’re always there, waiting.*

Al’ Thor sighed. “*Looks* safe enough. *Is* it? I don’t know.” He paused a second, fidgeting. Mat heard a metallic sound, and al’ Thor said, “Reckon we have enough coin left for a meal and a night’s stay— should even have some left over— and I well know we could use it. What do you say?”

Mat took a breath. “I say, ‘Aye.’”

“Aye, then.”

It wasn’t a minute before Mat was stepping into the bright warmth of the inn, filled with laughter and scores of voices talking over one another. The wall of black in Mat’s eyes went to white, and the light hurt, like a burning.

Al’ Thor stopped for a second in the doorway, but then started walking with a purpose, and Mat kept up as best he could, trying not to trip over legs or chairs or floorboards.

Al' Thor introduced himself to a man— Rulan Allwine by name, and if he hadn't named himself innkeeper, Mat would have guessed it on account of his round voice, a fat man's voice— and asked after a meal and a room. When Master Allwine named the price, Mat's blind eyes widened, and al' Thor made a choking sound.

“Times are hard, even here in Market Sheran,” Master Allwine said in a resigned voice. “There ain't much, and what there is costs five times what it used to. It'll be more next month, I'll lay oath on it.”

Mat shook his head to himself.

“Mat?” al' Thor asked.

“Aye,” Mat said, digging his own coins out of his pocket and handing them to al' Thor. “Unless you have a better idea?”

Al' Thor paid the innkeeper and handed a few— a very few— coins back to Mat. *That's robbery, that is.* Mat stifled an urge to protest and handed the coins back to al' Thor, who could see well enough to count them and keep them safe. Ten minutes later they were eating stew at a table near a fire. Mat held the bowl close to his face and shoveled the stew into his mouth with chunks of bread. It wasn't a lot of food, but it was hot and filling. The steam from his food and the heat from the fire drove the cold from his body.

It was so good to eat and be warm that he nearly forgot the pain behind his eyes from what seemed to be a very well-lit room. After a few minutes, though, he couldn't ignore it anymore. He dug out the scarf the farmer had given him and wound it round his forehead, pulling it down until his eyes were almost completely covered. *Why is it I can never just blend in? This is no way to hide from fades and darkfriends.* He finished his meal quickly.

“Let's get to our room,” Mat said. “The less time out in the open, the better. These people— no telling who these people are.”

“Alright,” said al' Thor, and went to fetch the innkeeper.

Master Allwine led them through a jumble of corridors to a small room in a far corner of the inn. When he left, al' Thor dropped his things and helped Mat to his bed.

“Do you— do you need help getting ready for bed?” al' Thor asked.

Mat felt his cheeks flush. *Cloak. Boots. Coat. Shirt. Trousers. If I don't need help getting them off, I'll need help in the morning.* His cheeks got hotter. *Like a baby. A bloody baby.*

“No, I— I'll be fine. I'll just sleep in these. They've done me well the past few nights.”

“Nonsense. They're still wet. Here.”

Al' Thor helped him undress and put some dry underclothes on. Mat hated to admit it, but he did need the help, and it did feel much better to be in dry underclothes than the wet clothes he'd been wearing all day and longer. He crawled into bed and curled up.

“Thanks, al' Thor,” he said. “For, you know, for everything.”

“Aye,” said al' Thor. “Think nothing of it.”

And Mat fell asleep, and didn't have a dream all night.

“I can see!”

Mat's voice startled Rand awake. He sat up in his bed.

“I mean, shapes, at least,” Mat said. “Sort of. Blurry shapes. No colors. But better than yesterday, for true.”

Rand looked out the window. The sky was bright; the sun was probably already over the horizon. He got up and threw his clothes on.

“Good,” he said, “that’s good. Daylight’s passing. Are you good to get dressed yet? How much better are your eyes?”

“Well,” said Mat, “I can tell you where the window is.”

Rand slipped his boots on and tied them tight, then helped Mat put his clothes on and get his pack ready. The delight in Mat’s voice seemed to turn to defeat in the blink of an eye.

“Don’t fret, Mat,” said Rand. “You’ll be right before you know it. Shapes, yeah? Things are looking up.”

And they were. They had put a day’s travel between themselves and Four Kings, and none of Gode’s men had shown up. And they were a day closer to Caemlyn, where Moiraine Sedai would be waiting for them. *An Aes Sedai waiting for us, and that’s a good thing. How did we end up here?* It didn’t matter. They *were* a day closer to Caemlyn, where they *would* find Moiraine Sedai and Lan, and that *was* a good thing. Rand was in a fine enough mood to put some of their dwindling stock of coins toward breakfast— a big loaf of bread and a pitcher of milk, cold from the spring house.

His good humor didn’t last long. He and Mat were eating in the back of the common room when a village boy came in, twirling a cloth cap round his finger. He looked around at the few people in the room, and his eyes settled on Mat and Rand. The boy looked— surprised? afraid? Rand wasn’t sure. But after a moment’s hesitation, he walked over to their table.

“Mind if I sit down?” he asked. He looked older than Rand, but he had his eyes down and swallowed hard after he spoke.

Nervous. What’s he nervous about? Rand waved a hand at an empty chair and said, “Please, friend.” But he was not at all sure this boy was a friend. He rather thought the opposite. *Now I’m thinking like Mat.* Rand shook his

head and tried to set aside his distrust, which wasn't based on anything he could explain to himself.

“What's your name?” he asked. He looked at Mat, who was staring down at the bread in his hands. It gave him a nervous look, too, though not fidgety like the stranger. Rand tried to think why Mat would be nervous, but he couldn't figure it. Then he saw. *He's not nervous. He's hiding his blindness. Well, near blindness.*

“My name? My name. Ah... call me Paitr.” The boy's eyes shifted nervously as he sat. “I was thinking we could talk. I-I heard what happened at Four Kings. Some of it, anyway. Word travels, and— ”

“Darkfriend,” Mat said with a growl. Rand looked over at Mat, whose eyes were now trained on the stranger, looking quite sharp and focused. *More suspicious every day. This is beginning to wear on him, this...adventure. You'd hardly know him for a scamp or a rascal.*

Rand looked back at Paitr. He didn't look like a darkfriend to Rand. Of course, neither had Gode. He'd had no Dragon's Fang on his forehead. But at least Gode had looked... *different*. Paitr could have fit right in Emond's Field.

The stranger gave a jerk and half lifted out of his chair. He stared wildly around the room, but there was no one there to hear. He sat back down and looked from Rand to Mat and back uncertainly. Sweat beaded on his upper lip. He looked uncomfortable, and who wouldn't be after such an accusation. *But he says not a word against it. Not a word. And how would he know about Four Kings, or guess it had anything to do with us?* Rand tensed and reached his hand slowly, casually, toward the scabbard at his hip.

“Leave us alone,” Rand said. “Tell your friends the same. We want nothing from them, and they'll get nothing from us.”

“Don't,” said Mat, still looking right into Paitr's eyes, “and I'll name you for what you are. See what your village friends think of that.”

“I’m alone here, I lay oath!”

He really is nervous, now. Rand swallowed the last of the milk and stuffed the heel of his half of the bread into his pocket. With their money almost gone, it might be their next meal. He started to stand, then hesitated. If they just stood and left, Paitr would surely note that Mat was nearly blind, note it and tell other darkfriends. Mat would be as a crippled sheep in a flock, quickly hunted down as soon as it is separated from its brothers and sisters.

“Your oath offers rather less comfort than you seem to think,” he said, getting to his feet. “Time to go, Mat.” As Mat started to stand, Rand leaned forward and bent over, coming nose to nose with Paitr. “Leave us alone, darkfriend,” he said. “Don’t make me tell you again. Leave. Us. *Alone.*”

Paitr swallowed hard and pressed back in his chair; there was no blood left in his face at all. *Like a fade. But with eyes. And scared. Don’t expect I’ll ever see a fade scared.*

By the time the boy looked back at Mat, Mat was on his feet, staff in hand. Any awkwardness in his standing had gone unseen. Rand hastily hung the saddlebags and other bundles around him. If Paitr thought it odd that Mat carried nothing, let him. Rand could do naught for it.

The outline of the door was bright and clear, and Mat made a line for it. Not fast, but not slow enough to seem unnatural, either. The way was clear of any tables or chair, and Rand caught up quickly.

Paitr got up and trailed behind them. “Wait,” he said, his voice tinged with the quickness of desperation. “You *have* to wait.”

“You’ll find that we don’t,” Rand said without looking back. They were almost to the door, and Mat had not put a foot wrong yet.

“Just listen to me,” Paitr said, and put his hand on Mat’s shoulder to stop him.

Rand whirled around, hand clenched in a rock of a fist, and connected with Paitr's jaw with all of his momentum. He felt a crunch, and the boy fell on his rear. Paitr's hand went to his face. He coughed and spat out some blood. The mix of blood and spit dripped down his chin and pooled on his shirt.

"Keep your filthy hands off him, darkfriend," Rand said, his voice almost a whisper. "I told you: leave us alone."

"You won't get away," Paitr said, spitting again. "No matter how strong you are, the Lord of Chaos is stronger. The Shadow will swallow you, boy. Both of you."

Someone at the far end of the common room gasped. A man who had been sweeping near the windows dropped his broom and it clattered against the floor. All eyes were on Paitr now, and his face went white as his mouth worked silently. He gave a wild curse and sprang to his feet, darting out of the inn and down the street. The old man shifted his attention to Rand and Mat, looking not a whit less frightened.

Rand hustled Mat out of the inn and onto the road as fast as he could, listening all the while for a hue and cry that never came but still rang loud in his ears.

"Blood and ashes," Mat said once they'd cleared the village. "They're always there, everywhere, right on our heels. We'll never get away."

"No they're not," Rand said. "If Væ'alza knew we were here, do you think he'd have left it to that halfwit? There'd have been another Gode, and twenty or thirty bullyboys. They're still hunting, but they won't know until Paitr tells them, and maybe he really is alone. He might have to go all the way to Four Kings, for all we know. And all we need to do is get to Caemlyn. Things will be better when we're back with Moiraine Sedai."

"And you're so sure she'll be there. That any of them will be, or even made it out of Shadar Logoth."

“Why would we be any more likely to make it out than they?” Rand saw in his mind again the arm of Mashadar separating him from Egwene. *If anything, they had a better chance to escape.* “No, I’ll believe that till I’m forced not to.”

“Even if they’re there, are you certain that will be a good thing? She’s an Aes Sedai, and we’ve had naught but trouble since she came to Emond’s Field. Who’s to say she’s really a friend?”

“She’s saved our lives more than once. No trolloc or fade can say the same. We have to trust someone. Who else would you choose?”

Mat was quiet for a moment. “Maybe,” he finally said. “Anyway, thanks for, you know, back in town. That was... well, thanks.”

“Aye. Aye.”



They got six short rides that day. It rained all morning— a cutting, icy rain. It thinned to showers in the afternoon and had stopped altogether by the evening. With the rain coming down so hard, they barely even noticed the first village they passed through, about an hour before noon. Their ride was going no further, so they caught on with another farmer going home. He told them an interesting story, about darkfriends that had come to Market Sheran. The people there were in a state. The whole thing was nonsense, of course, and the farmer laughed it off. But by the time they reached a second village with the sun low in the west, the story had grown. Now it was twenty darkfriends, and they’d had a gathering in Market Sheran— men and women with twisted bodies, covered in dirt and dressed in rags and bones. It had led to a great fight in the inn.

Mat just shook his head. *How did the story get here before we did?* His eyes had improved plenty since the morning. Nothing was very sharp— it was

almost like looking through water or warped glass— and he still wore the scarf to shade his eyes. But he could see colors and shapes, and when he hopped off the last wagon, he could see that they were in a small village, not much bigger than Emond’s Field. On either side of the wide Caemlyn Road stood rows of small brick houses with thatched roofs. The big building to the right had to be the town’s inn, which looked a mite smaller than the Winespring back home. He couldn’t read the sign creaking back and forth on a bracket out front, but al’ Thor told him it said “The Queen’s Man.”

“How much coin is left?” Mat asked.

“Not much more than none,” said al’ Thor. “Even if prices aren’t as high as in Market Sheran, we have too little for a meal or a room, either one.”

“Well, my da always says, ‘If you can’t eat a meal, at least drink an ale.’”

Al’ Thor looked at him all stone-like, then burst out laughing. “That I think we can manage,” he said. “Besides, there can’t be darkfriends in every inn between here and Caemlyn, can there?” Mat thought there very well might, but he said nothing.

Inside the Queen’s Man, the tables were all filled, but al’ Thor found them room on a bench against the far wall.

“Good even, young masters,” a serving maid said. Mat couldn’t quite make out her face, but he could hear her smiling through her dark, scratchy voice. “What might I get for you, now?”

“Well, my dear,” Mat began with a smile, “we have— how much do we have?” He waited while al’ Thor took their coins from his coat and showed them to the girl. “We’ve come a long way, and have a long way to go yet. That is the last of our coin, and we’d be much obliged for a mug of ale to share and as much bread as that will buy us.”

She stood there with her hand on her hip. Mat couldn’t tell if she was smiling or sneering, amused or annoyed. Then she said, “I’ll see what I can

do,” and walked away. Mat looked at al’ Thor. “So,” he said, “*you* can see. Did it look like she’s gonna bring us any bread?”

“Yeah,” al’ Thor said. “Yes. I think so.”

Mat looked back out at the room. “Was she pretty?”

“Uh... yeah. I mean, yeah. She was... yeah.”

“Oh for the love of— Bashful don’t suit you, al’ Thor. Now, you either thought she was pretty or you ain’t. Which one is it?”

“Yes,” said al’ Thor, raising his voice in frustration. “Yes, okay? She was very pretty.”

“Why, thank you, young master. Your face ain’t half bad, neither.” The serving maid had walked up from al’ Thor’s blind side and caught him unawares. Mat let out a howling laugh.

“Button it, Mat.” Al’ Thor’s face had gone bright crimson. Even Mat could see that.

The serving maid set down two mugs of ale— two! — and said, “You two enjoy these, then come see me in the kitchen about getting some real food, okay?” She ran a finger behind al’ Thor’s ear, then smacked Mat between the shoulder blades as she walked past. He swatted playfully at her hand, but was late and caught her flush on the backside. It was Mat’s turn to blush, but before the red could bloom in his cheeks, he felt the maid’s hot breath and dark whisper in his ear. “Some edibles take coin,” she said. “Some do not.”

Mat felt a tightening between his legs and laughed. He turned, but she was already gone.

They drank their mugs of ale and watched the people around them. Every table was filled, and a drone of conversation hung in the air. A man sitting on a table in the corner was playing a recorder, and some of the customers

sang along, though none danced. A lot of the chatter around them was about the false Dragon in Caemlyn. Folks passing through were headed to see him, and folks as lived there were asking for news and rumors.

Mat and al' Thor sat there for half an hour or more. In that time, they saw three different fights— real fistfights— about whether Logain was a false Dragon or the true one, Lews Therin reborn, come to break the world again. When al' Thor saw the serving maid wave them toward the kitchen, Mat was only too glad to leave the common room behind.

In the kitchen, Mat learned the serving maid's name— Essaiya— and watched hungrily as the cook made each of them real plates— some kind of potato dish, along with what looked like some kind of stewed poultry— and Essaiya brought them over to where they sat at a side table.

“Here you are, young masters,” she said, and Mat could see well enough now that he could make out a smile.

Mat smiled back and turned to al' Thor, and the smile died on his lips. Al' Thor was sitting with his head in his hands, bent over all the way to his knees. He was shivering, even in the heat of the kitchen, and now that Mat was paying attention he caught a low, steady moan coming from al' Thor's throat.

“Hey, mate, what's this now?” he asked. “What— Do you need some help?”

“So... cold...”

Al' Thor's teeth started to chatter.

“Hey!” Mat turned; it was the cook, pointing her wooden spoon at the two of them. “No sick boys in my kitchen. Out! Now!”

“Hey, now,” Mat said, “no need to sound the alarm, Mistress. He's fine. We're just tired, and spent all day in the cold rain. Just give him a second. That delicious stew will put him in fine shape, it will.”

“No! What will people say if they hear there’s a sick boy in the kitchen? Out!”

This back-and-forth went on for a minute or two before Mat decided he’d had enough. He gathered their things, then took al’ Thor by the arm and lifted him off of his stool. “Come on, old boy. We’re getting out of here.”

Weaving, helping al’ Thor make his way, Mat led them through the kitchen and out the back door.

“S-s-sorry, M-m-mat,” al’ Thor said.

At least he has some sense of what’s going on. “Not a bit of it.” They were in the stableyard, and the stable was to the right.

“M-m-must have... b-been th-the... rain.” Al’ Thor could barely get his words out, his teeth were chattering so hard. “One m-more... night out... One m-more night w-won’t... h-hurt, I guess. So c-cold.” Twilight darkened the sky, spotted by a handful of stars.

“Maybe not, but I don’t aim to find out.” Mat took them into the stable. “Here,” Mat said, pulling open the stable door with a loud creak of hinges.

It was darker inside than out, and the air smelled of hay and grain and horses and dung. Mat lowered al’ Thor to the straw-covered floor. Al’ Thor folded over with his chest on his knees, hugging himself and shaking from head to toe. *That can’t be good.* Mat left him to look for a light. He found a battered old lantern that he got lit without too much trouble.

Unsurprisingly, the stable was as full as the inn. Every stall had a horse, some raising their heads and blinking at the light. Mat eyed the ladder to the hayloft, then looked at al’ Thor, crouched on the floor.

“Never get you up there,” he said to himself. Hanging the lantern on a nail, he scrambled up the ladder and began tossing down armloads of hay. When he came back down, he made a bed at the back of the stable and pulled

al' Thor onto it. Then took off his cloak and covered both of them, but al' Thor pushed it off.

“Hot.” Al' Thor tugged at his collar and tossed his head, then shrugged halfway out of his cloak before falling back into the bed of hay. “Hot.”

Mat felt his forehead. “Fever. Where’s Nynaeve when you need her?” He helped al' Thor out of his cloak, then bundled both cloaks around himself.

Mat did not get much sleep that night. He covered al' Thor when he shook, and brought him water when he was thirsty. The night deepened, and the stable shifted in the flickering lantern light. Mat did his best to rest.

“Look at us,” he said, watching al' Thor sleep. “One takes ill, the other takes care. Then we switch places. Let’s not make a pattern of this.” He thought of Moiraine Sedai. “Or a Pattern.” He laughed softly to himself.

Mat must have dozed off, because he jerked awake when he heard al' Thor screaming.

“Mat! Mat, they’re here! They’ve come!” Al' Thor was trying— in vain— to get to his feet while his fingers scrabbled for his sword hilt.

“What?” Mat asked, shaking himself and forcing his eyes open.
“Darkfriends? Where?”

Wavering on his knees, al' Thor pointed frantically to the end of the stable, his mouth agape. Shadows stirred, and a horse stamped in its sleep. Nothing more. Al' Thor fell back on the straw.

“Ain’t nobody here, mate,” Mat said. “Here, let me take that.” He reached for the sword belt, but al' Thor tightened his grip on the hilt.

“No. No. I have to keep it. It’s Father’s. F-father’s!” Al' Thor fell to the floor in a new fit of shivering. Mat gave up trying to take the sword and pulled the cloaks back over him.

Al' Thor passed out again. He muttered nonsense throughout the night, as well as the odd sentence now and then about Egwene, or Perrin, or one of the others. When he babbled about Elsa, Mat had to chuckle. Once, al' Thor started yelling loudly enough to wake himself from his slumber— “Who am I? Tell me, please. Who am I? *Who am I?*”

“Easy, al' Thor.”

Al' Thor blinked for a moment, then looked Mat in the eye with a spark of recognition.

“Just rest easy. You're Rand al' Thor, that's who you are. The ugliest face and the oddest manner in all the Two Rivers.” He felt al' Thor's forehead. “Sweaty. The fever's broken.” He nodded to no one.

“Rand al' Thor,” al' Thor whispered. Mat nodded again, and al' Thor went right back to sleep. He rested more easily through the rest of the night. Mat would wake now and then with a start, but every time he found al' Thor just as he'd left him, dead to the world.



A crowing cock woke Mat in the morning, but al' Thor remained dead to the world. While he slept, Mat left the stable and went to the back door of the inn, hoping to nick a bit of breakfast. They still had a few coppers— the cook had chased them out before collecting them the night before— but Mat would wear his hair in a braid before spending the last of their money at a place that had treated them so poorly. *Except for Essaiya. She was right friendly.* Mat caught himself grinning and shook his head to clear his thoughts. He squinted and concentrated on his surroundings. The blush of dawn was glowing in the east, and Mat could see the entire stableyard. Maybe not with perfect clarity, but not much less. He could walk, run, even shoot a bow if he had to. He smiled and slowly opened the door to the inn.

The door was in a back corner of the kitchen, at the right end of the wall from where Mat stood. On the counter in the corner to his left sat a stack of bread, freshly baked. Crouching, he crept behind a big butcher's block toward the bread. Before he could reach it, though, he heard the door to the common room swing open and two people talking as they walked into the kitchen. He stopped to listen.

"...possibly remember every one of these fool strangers what passes through." Mat recognized the cook's voice.

"Yes, but I'm not asking if you remember *every* stranger." It was a woman's voice Mat didn't know. "I am asking about just *two*. Two, or even one. You could remember two, if they stood out, yes?"

Mat held his breath. *That's us, and a bloody darkfriend asking about us, I'll lay oath.* The cook was clattering about in a cupboard, looking for something. Mat hoped the racket hid any sound he might be making.

"One," the woman continued, "very tall, reddish hair, a sword at his hip. The other of average..."

The door swung back open and the two walked back into the common room, never pausing in their conversation. Mat took a deep breath, grabbed two loaves of bread, and tried his best to run and be silent at the same time.

When he got back to the stable, al'Thor was awake and up on his knees. He was pawing through their packs, looking every bit the part of a boy who'd been sick all night. *Blood and ashes. He's so pale and...moist. Sacs under his eyes. We'll never get out of here in time.* Mat had a moment of panic, and it occurred to him that he could run on his own, that finding al'Thor might satisfy the darkfriends and leave Mat free to see the world. But before the thought had even fully formed, he remembered that first night of blindness, and how frightened he'd been of being alone, and how steady and strong al'Thor had been.

"Heyo, al'Thor," he said. "I see you're awake. Look what I found."

Al' Thor looked at him, and Mat thought him near to crying.

"I thought— I mean, I saw your haversack, and your staff, so I reckoned you hadn't— but you may have— I mean, I didn't know." Al' Thor took a breath.

"I'm glad to see you, Mat."

"Where else would I be? Oh, except *anywhere*, since a darkfriend is in the inn asking after us right now— right exactly now."

"A darkfriend!"

"Let's go. I'll take your things. You fix your mind on walking and not falling. How are your legs?"

"I can't dance," al' Thor said, "but get me on my feet and I can walk. Blood and ashes, I'll *run* if need be."

Hurriedly hanging himself about with their possessions, Mat pulled al' Thor to his wobbly feet. At first, he had to lean on Mat to stay upright, but he let go and stood on his own as they walked out into the morning light. They set off at a mite slower than Mat wanted, but they'd have to ease into it as al' Thor got his strength back.

The streets were filled with people, even so early. They were about their own business, though, and no one had any attention to spare for two young men walking out of the village, not with so many strangers about. *Or do they pretend? Is one of them in league with the darkfriend? Or is one of these the same woman from the Queen's Man?* Mat tried to look unremarkable as he led al' Thor out of the village and back onto the Caemlyn Road.

A mile outside the village, al' Thor's legs gave out. One second he was walking half a step behind Mat, panting but breathing steadily; the next he was clutching at the sleeve of Mat's coat and dragging them both to the ground.

Mat got to his hands and knees, then pulled al' Thor and their packs over to the side of the road. Al' Thor looked awful. Pale, tired, weak. Mat thought of al' Thor helping him walk while he was blind— near as good as carried him, really.

“We’d best keep going,” he said. He scrubbed his hand through his hair, then tugged the scarf lower down. As much as his eyes had improved, they were starting to hurt in the full light of day. “We’re too exposed, and too slow. Easy pickings. We need to catch a ride,” he said.

Two carts passed by. Each time he worried that the driver was a darkfriend. Each time, concern turned into certainty. And each time, the driver passed by without even looking at them. The third cart he saw, though, slowed to a stop right in front of them. A leather-faced man looked down from the driver’s seat.

“Something wrong with him?” the man asked, pointing his pipe toward al' Thor.

“Nah, he’s just tired,” Mat said.

Al' Thor seemed to realize what was going on. He let go of Mat and took a step toward the cart. Mat could see the weakness in his legs, but he doubted the driver could.

“I haven’t slept in two days,” al' Thor said. “Ate something that made me sick. I’m better, now, but I haven’t slept.”

The man blew a streamer of smoke from the corner of his mouth. “Going to Caemlyn, are you? I was your age, I expect I might be off to see this false Dragon myself.”

“Aye, that’s right,” Mat said with a nod. “We aim to see the false Dragon.”

“Well, climb on up, then. Your friend in the back. If he’s sick again, best it’s on the straw, not up here. Name’s Hyam Kinch.”

The horsemen passed in two columns on the left, heading back west where Mat and al' Thor had come from. Long white collars hung down over their plate and mail. They had well-made cloaks and undercoats of a rich red, and each wore a conical helmet that shone like silver. They sat their horses with straight backs. Each held his lance at the same angle, each lance bearing a thin red streamer beneath its head, fluttering in the wind.

Altogether, their appearance and bearing reeked of authority, and Mat was feeling none too trustful of authority at the moment. He wasn't even feeling trustful of the farmer giving them a ride.

Some of the horsemen glanced into the cart as they passed. A cage of steel bars masked each face. A few nodded to Master Kinch, and he nodded back. It could have been just a neutral greeting. It could have been the nod of confederates, tasked with capturing Mat and al' Thor. *We should have just walked from Market Sheran.* That was absurd, of course. They would have been a day or more behind. But Mat couldn't shake his suspicion of Master Kinch. Or of the three dozen horsemen he counted, for that matter.

"Who were they?" he asked.

"Queen's Guards," Master Kinch said. He chewed on his pipe, keeping his eyes on the road ahead. "Won't go much further than Breen's Spring, less they're called for. Not like the old days." He paused to suck on his pipe. "Suppose there's parts of the Realm don't see the Guards in a year or more. Not like the old days."

"What are they doing?" Mat asked. "They look like Whitecloaks, with those collars, and that shiny armor."

Master Kinch raised an eyebrow at him. "The Guards keep the Queen's peace and uphold the Queen's law. Search out malefactors and see them before a magistrate." He let out a long streamer of smoke and returned his gaze to the road. "Whitecloaks," he said softly, shaking his head. He looked

at Mat again. “You two must be from pretty far off not to recognize the Queen’s Guard. Where’s home?”

“Far off,” Mat said at the same instant that al’ Thor said, “The Two Rivers.” Mat shot al’ Thor a look. He didn’t like sharing more about themselves than needed. If the wrong person— or worse, a fade— heard that they were from the Two Rivers, they were as good as stewing in a trolloc’s cookpot. *His fool head must still be foggy.*

The farmer puffed his pipe in silence for a while. “That’s far off, sure,” he said finally. “But I never thought to see the day when two Andoran boys— however far off they come from— ain’t even *recognize* the Queen’s Guards. Not like the old days at all.”

Mat wondered if his da even knew they were part of some Queen’s Realm, or if the Mayor did. He had never heard anyone mention it.

They rode on in silence for a while, then Master Kinch pulled on the reins and drew the cart to a halt. “Far as I go.” A narrow cart path led off to the north; several farmhouses were visible in that direction across open fields, plowed but still bare of crops. “Two days will see you in Caemlyn. Least, if your friend can get his legs under him.”

Mat hopped down and retrieved his staff and other things, then helped al’ Thor climb off the tail of the cart. Al’ Thor’s bundles weighed on him, and his legs wobbled, but he shrugged off Mat’s hand and tried a few steps on his own. He still looked unsteady, but his legs held him up.

The farmer did not start his horse up again right away. He studied them for a minute, sucking on his pipe. “You can rest up a day or two at my place, if you want. Won’t miss anything in that time, I suppose. Whatever sickness you’re getting over, young master... well, the old woman and me, we already had about every sickness you can think of afore you were even born, and nursed our younglings through them, too. Expect you’re past the catching stage, anyway.”

Mat's eyes narrowed. *Why so eager to get us off the road? What's waiting for us at his farm?* He looked at al' Thor. "You're alright to walk, ain't you, al' Thor? How far is it to the next village, Master Kinch?"

Master Kinch took his pipe from between his teeth and pursed his lips thoughtfully before answering. "First off, I reckoned you for runaway prentices, but now I expect it's something more serious you're running from. Don't know what. Don't care. I'm a fair enough judge to say you ain't darkfriends, and not like to rob nor hurt a body. Can't say the same for everyone on the road these days. I got in trouble a time or two myself when I was your age. If you need a place to keep out of sight a few days, my farm is five miles yonder"—he jerked his head toward the cart track—"and ain't nobody ever come out there. Whatever's chasing you, ain't like to find you."

"And how is it you know what darkfriends look like?" Mat said. He backed away from the cart, and his hand went under his coat. "What do you know about darkfriends?"

Master Kinch's face tightened. "Suit yourselves. Carysford is half a day's walk down the road," he said, and clucked to his horse. The cart rolled off down the narrow path, and he never looked back.

Mat looked at al' Thor and his scowl faded. "Ack, I'm sorry, al' Thor. You need a place to rest. Maybe if we go after him..." He shrugged. "I just can't get over the feeling that everybody's after us. I just wish I knew why."

"Can't be everyone's after us. Most people don't know we exist. And if some are out to get us, well, I guess we'll find out why soon enough."

But Mat was afraid that he already knew. *Carai an Caldazar. 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 old blood. *The Dark One is after my blood.* Mat shook his head and kept on down the road.

Mat rolled out of the haystack, scratching vigorously where the straw had worked its way under his clothes. It was just before dawn, but al' Thor was already up, watching the people on the road— a steady trickle walking in ones and twos, some with packs or bundles on their backs, others with nothing but a walking staff, if that. Most were young men, but here and there was a girl, or someone older. All of them had the travel-stained look of having walked a long way. *The perfect place for a darkfriend to hide, hunting for us.*

Mat looked at al' Thor. Maybe it was the rest, or the forgiving light of morning, but he looked much better. Still looked underfed though, and Mat felt the same. “You think we might get something to eat today?” he asked.

“Best get on the move before we think on that,” said al' Thor, digging his share of their bundles out of the haystack and starting toward the road.

Mat got his things and hurried to catch up. Al' Thor was waiting for him at the side of the road. As Mat walked up, he heard al' Thor ask a boy, “Where are you bound?”

“Why, Caemlyn, for to see the Dragon,” the boy said without stopping. He was about their age, his clothes and knapsack covered in dust. “Same as you.” With a laugh he went on, his eyes already up the road again, hunting for his future.

Mat and al' Thor asked several people where they were headed that day. Most everyone said the same thing. Except the locals— they just spat and turned away, or cursed the people swarming the road that ran through their home. And even when they turned away, they kept a wary and watchful eye on the travelers.

Many a wagon driver shouted at the travelers as he tried to force a way through. Some wagons just refused to slow. At first Mat thought they were darkfriends who'd found them and were now attacking. But those stubborn drivers threatened to run down everyone on the road, and paid Mat and al' Thor no more mind than anyone else. Even so, Mat grew tired of having to dodge wagons, and that was before the first merchants' train came up

from behind them. The train's lead wagon took him almost completely unawares. A flicker of motion to his left was his only warning. Instinctively he ducked and took a knee, just before the driver's whip cracked in the air where his head had been. He met the driver's eyes as the wagon rolled by—hard eyes above a tight, twisted mouth. Not a care that he might have drawn blood, or taken an eye.

“Burn you, you leper of a whoreson,” Mat shouted as he stood up. “You can't—” Something hard cracked into his shoulder, knocking him back down. He looked up and saw a mounted guard pointing a spear at Mat, butt first.

“Out of the way, filthy farm boy,” the guard said as he passed.

Al' Thor helped him get to his feet. They avoided the wagons after that, or did their best to. So many crowded the road that the rattle and clatter of one hardly faded before they heard another coming. Guards and drivers, they all stared at the travelers heading for Caemlyn as if seeing dirt walk.

Once a driver actually hit al' Thor with his whip, opening a shallow gash over his eyebrow. Al' Thor reached up and felt the wound, then felt his eye as if to make sure it was still there.

Mat looked up at the driver, who just smirked. Anger twisted Mat's mouth in a snarl as he reached under his cloak for his dagger. Al' Thor grabbed him by the arm before he could draw.

“Let it go,” he said. He jerked his head at the guards riding alongside the wagons. Some of them were laughing; others gave Mat a hard eye. “If we're lucky, they'd just beat us with their spears. If we're lucky.”

Mat dropped his arm, but the snarl remained on his lips as al' Thor pulled him on down the road.

Once a squadron of the Queen's Guards came trotting down the road, streamers on their lances fluttering in the wind. Some of the local farmers shouted out them, and Mat slowed down to hear what they said.

“Clear them off the road, man! How can we go on this way?”

“If one of them steals something, or trespasses on your land,” said the Captain of the Guard, “I’ll haul him before a magistrate. But they break no Queen’s Law by walking on the Queen’s Highway.”

“But they’re all over the place,” the farmer said. “Who knows who they are, or what they are. All this talk about the Dragon— ”

“You’ve only a handful here, friend. Caemlyn’s walls are bulging with them, and more coming every day.” The captain caught sight of Mat and al’Thor, standing still and listening. He pointed down the road with a steel-backed gauntlet. “Get on with you. You’ll ruin my day if you make me bring you in for blocking traffic.”

As they walked on, Mat decided that the crowded road was to their advantage. True, any of these people could be darkfriends, but with so many travel-stained young men, it would be near impossible to pick Mat and al’Thor out, like picking two particular pigeons out of a flock.

The closer they got to Caemlyn, the more hostile the farmers seemed. More than once they passed farms where a man patrolled the fences with his dogs growling and tugging at their leashes. Those farmers looked as if they wanted nothing more than an excuse to let their dogs loose.

Mat and al’Thor passed through two villages that afternoon. At each one, the crowd on the road thinned as people found places to sleep for the night — inns for those with money, hedges or fields without dogs for those without. By dusk, Mat and al’Thor had the Caemlyn Road to themselves.

Mat began talking about finding another haystack, but al’Thor insisted they keep on. “As long as we can see the road. The further we go before stopping, the further ahead we are.”

*Unless they’re waiting for us in Caemlyn. Why shouldn’t they be before us **and** behind? They have been the whole time.* Mat kept his thoughts to himself and grunted his assent. As long as they couldn’t know which was

the greater danger, to be still or to rush headlong, it was as well to keep moving, to at least feel like they were doing something. Or so Mat reasoned to himself.

The night thickened, relieved only a bit by scant moonlight. Aching knots formed in Mat's calves. It took all his concentration to keep his feet moving one in front of the other. It was only when al' Thor nudged him with his elbow that Mat looked up and saw the lights; they had come to the next village.

Mat sagged to his knees with a groan. "Can we stop now?" he panted. "Or do you want to find an inn and hang out a sign for the darkfriends? Or a fade, mayhap?"

"The other side of the town," al' Thor answered, staring at the lights. "Another mile, that's all."

"That's all," he says. "Just another mile," he says. "Blood and ashes."

The streets were empty, but the village was not asleep quite yet. Most houses had a light in at least one window, and the inn in the middle of town was brightly lit and alive with the sound of music and laughter, audible even through the thick walls. The wind had picked up, and the sign over the door creaked as it swayed.

Al' Thor stopped in the shadows beside a house that stood dark, and Mat stopped beside him. At the near end of the inn, a cart and horse stood in the road with a man checking the harness. Two men stood at the far end of the building, on the very edge of the light.

"Just a moment's rest," al' Thor said, and leaned against the house. "Just till the road is clear."

Mat felt like he could fall asleep standing there, but something about the two men at the rim of the shadows put a quiver in his stomach. He looked more closely, but he couldn't figure what it was. He shut his eyes and shook

his head. *Al'Thor's right; can't be **everyone's** after us. Gotta stop being so suspicious.*

Mat turned his eyes to the cart and horse. The man checking the harness reached the end of the strap he was looking at, adjusted the bit in the horse's mouth, then went back and started over from the beginning again. He kept his head down and his eyes away from the other men. He seemed to go out of his way to avoid looking at them, even turning awkwardly here and there.

He feels it, too. I'm not being foolish.

Mat looked again at the two men in the shadows. One was just a black shape, but the other stood more into the light, with his back to Mat. Even so, Mat could tell the second man was ill at ease, alternately wringing his hands and smoothing the long apron he wore, all the while keeping his eyes on the ground. Mat couldn't hear anything, but it seemed that the man in the shadows was doing all the talking; the other one just listened and gave an occasional jerky nod or shake of the head.

When they were done talking, the man in the shadows turned away. With the inn's sign going *scree-scree-scree* in the wind, Mat watched him slip away into the night and felt the strangest sensation—almost as if he could feel the shadow man sneaking up behind him even though he was plainly fifty spans in front of him. *Something's not right about that one.* When he passed through the light spilling from one of the inn's windows, Mat knew. *The wind is like to tear that sign right off its post, and that one's cloak stays dead still.*

Mat reached over and grabbed al'Thor's arm. "Fade," he said in a whisper, barely getting the word out.

"What—?"

He clamped a hand over al'Thor's mouth and held a finger to his own lips. "Shh." He looked back, but the dark shape of the halfman was lost in the darkness. *Has it left, or is it coming this way, slinking through the shadows?*

“It’s gone, now. I think. I hope.” He took his hand away, and al’ Thor took a long, shivering breath.

The nervous man who had been talking to the fade— *Of course he was nervous!*— was almost to the inn door. He stopped and smoothed down his apron one last time, then reached for the doorknob.

“Strange friends you’ve got, Raimun Holdwin,” the man by the cart said in a strong but weathered voice. He straightened and shook his head. “Strange friends in the dark for an innkeeper.”

The nervous man jumped when the other spoke. He drew a deep breath and gathered himself, then asked, “And what do you mean by that, Bunt?”

“Just what I said, nothing more. Strange friends. He’s not from around here, is he? Lot of odd folk coming through the last few weeks. Awful lot of odd folk.”

“I know a lot of men, Bunt, even men from Caemlyn. Not all of us stay cooped up on a farm, never knowing the world beyond this village. So happens this man’s from out Four Kings way. Looking for a couple of thieves. Young men. They stole a sword from him, a heron-mark.”

Mat had been keeping an eye on the two men and the other looking out for the fade, but now the two speakers had his full attention. He could feel al’ Thor’s breath catch beside him.

“A heron-mark sword!” Bunt said. “No wonder he wants it back.”

Holdwin nodded. “Yes, the sword and the young men, too. My friend’s a rich man, a... merchant, and these two have been stirring up trouble with his workers. Telling wild stories and getting people upset. My friend guesses that they’re darkfriends, and followers of Logain, beside.”

“Darkfriends *and* followers of the false Dragon? And telling wild stories, too? Getting up to a lot for young fellows. You did say they were young?”

Mat thought he could hear some hints of amusement in Bunt's voice, but the innkeeper did not seem to notice.

"Yes. Not yet twenty. There's a reward— a hundred crowns in gold— for the two of them. They've sly tongues, these two. In Four Kings they tried to turn neighbor against neighbor, ended up burning down half of an inn. Dangerous, even if they don't look it. Vicious. Best you stay clear if you think you see them. Two young men, one with a sword. Both looking over their shoulders, if they're smart. If they're the right ones, my, uh, friend will pick them up once they're located."

"You sound almost as if you'd know them by sight."

"Aye, I'll know them when I see them," Holdwin said. "Just don't try to take them yourself. No need for anyone to get hurt. Come tell me if you see them. And remember— a hundred crowns for the two, but he wants the pair."

"A hundred crowns for the two," Bunt said. "How much for this sword he wants so bad?"

Holdwin paused, and there was a curt, frustrated anger in his voice when he spoke again. "I don't know why I'm telling you," he said. "You're still fixed on that fool plan of yours, I see."

"Not such a fool plan," Bunt said. "There might not be another false Dragon to see before I die— give thanks if it's so— and I'm too old to eat some merchant's dust all the way to Caemlyn. I'll have the road to myself, and I'll be in town bright and early tomorrow."

"To yourself?" There was venom in the innkeeper's voice. "You can never tell what might be out in the night, Almen Bunt. All alone on the road, in the dark. Even if somebody hears you scream, there's no one will unbar a door to help. Not these days. Not even your nearest neighbor."

The old farmer spoke as calmly as before. "If the Queen's Guards can't keep the road safe this close to Caemlyn, then we're none of us safe even in

our own beds. If you ask me, one thing the Guards could do to make sure the roads are safe would be clap that friend of yours in irons. Sneaking around in the dark, afraid to let anybody get a look at him. Can't tell me he's not up to no good."

"Afraid! You old fool, if you knew—" Holdwin's teeth clicked shut, and he opened the door to music and laughter. "I'm wasting my time on you. Get off! Stop cluttering up the front of my inn." The night fell quiet again as the door swung closed.

Muttering to himself, Bunt took hold of the edge of the cart seat and set his foot on the wheelhub.

Al'Thor looked at Mat for a brief second, then started out of the shadows, toward the farmer and his wagon. Mat caught his arm as he started forward.

"Are you mad? He'll— he'll recognize us for sure! Your sword? Two young lads?"

"Would you rather stay here? With a halfman around? How far do you think we'll get on foot before it finds us?" He shook free of Mat and trotted up the road. But Mat noticed he was holding his cloak shut, keeping the sword hidden.

"At least he ain't totally daft," Mat said to himself as he raced to catch up. "Only *almost* totally."

As he caught up, al'Thor was speaking to the farmer. "I couldn't help overhearing you're going to Caemlyn," he said.

The man gave a start, gracelessly pulling a quarterstaff out of the cart. His leathery face was a mass of wrinkles and half his teeth were gone, but his gnarled hands held the staff steady. After a couple of breaths he lowered one end of the staff to the ground and leaned on it. "So you two are going to Caemlyn. To see the Dragon, eh?"

Al' Thor turned around. He looked surprised to see that Mat had followed him. *As if I had a bloody choice.* Mat wore a scowl of suspicion and tried to keep out of the light.

“The *false* Dragon,” al' Thor said.

Bunt nodded. “Of course. Of course.” He threw a sideways look at the inn, then shoved his staff back under the cart seat. “Well, if you want a ride, get in. I've wasted enough time.” He was already climbing to the seat.

Al' Thor clambered over the back as the farmer flicked the reins. Mat ran to catch up as the cart started off. Al' Thor caught his arms and pulled him aboard.

The village faded quickly into the night behind them. The rhythm of the wheels and the simple fact of not walking almost put Mat to sleep straight away, but his wariness— of both the farmer and the countryside— kept him awake, stifling his yawns with a fist. The night was almost completely dark. A few farmhouses had a light in a window, all seeming distant and in danger of being snuffed out under the weight of the night.

It could be out there anywhere. Or more than one. Halfmen.

“You two ever been to Caemlyn before?” Bunt gave a little chuckle. “No, I ain't suppose you have. Well, wait till you see it. The greatest city in the world. Oh, I've heard all about Illian and Ebou Dar and Tear and all— there's always some fool thinks a thing is bigger and better just because it's off a ways and near nobody's ever seen it. But for my money, Caemlyn is the grandest there is. Couldn't be grander. No, it couldn't. Unless maybe Queen Morgase were to get rid of that Tar Valon witch.”

Mat's ears perked up. He looked at al' Thor, who was sitting up and listening now, too.

“You mean an Aes Sedai?” al' Thor asked.

“What else would I mean? Sitting there in the Palace like a spider. Just ain’t right. Don’t get me wrong— I’m a good Queen’s man. I ain’t one of these fools saying Elaida’s got too much influence over the Queen, or Elaida’s the queen in all but name— ” He spat into the night. “That for them. Morgase is no puppet to dance for any Tar Valon witch.”

Mat sank back down in the cart. *A fade behind us and an Aes Sedai ahead. Maybe two.* He looked at al’ Thor, and at a nod, slid down lower so they could talk.

“Another Aes Sedai,” al’ Thor whispered. “If— *when* Moiraine Sedai gets to Caemlyn, she might well go to an Aes Sedai. If Moiraine... if we don’t see her in Caemlyn, this other Aes Sedai may be able to help us get to Tar Valon.”

“No,” Mat said, shaking his head. “One Aes Sedai is more than enough to be tangled up with. Ain’t gonna go seeking one out, whatever we find in Caemlyn.”

They kept their voices low, and Almen Bunt went right on talking. “Now, I’m a good Queen’s man, but I’ll not say we don’t need some changes. This weather, the crops failing, cows drying up, calves and lambs born dead, or with two heads. Bloody ravens don’t even wait for things to die. Dragon’s Fang turning up on doors. Things creeping about in the night. Barns getting burned. Fellows lurking in the night like that Holdwin’s friend. If the Aes Sedai can’t help with all that, what good is she?”

Mat grunted. The man’s mood seemed to mirror his own. The whole world was a danger. Over the side of the cart, the shadows and shapes seemed to writhe in the black. But Mat was no readier to trust this Queen than any other stranger, whatever the farmer said.

Still, Bunt took Mat’s grunt for agreement. “If the witches were so valuable as they say, we would never have had a War of Succession. They couldn’t protect Luc, dead in the Blight before he was ever anointed, or Tigraine, vanished when it came time to take the throne. For all their skill at the

Game of Houses, they couldn't help Morgase take the Lion Throne without spilling blood.

“So I say, let's stop all this truck with Tar Valon. It's time the Lion Throne and the White Tower weren't twisted round one another in men's minds anymore. Take the Lady Elayne and the Lord Gawyn, now. We're, what, months away from them going to Tar Valon? Ain't years, I know that much. I say, keep them home. Send *Elaida* to Tar Valon, not the Daughter-Heir and her brother.

“If they've got to go someplace else to learn what they need, well, Illian's got libraries as good as Tar Valon. Or Cairhien, to learn all there is about ruling and scheming. Nobody knows more about scheming than a Cairhiener, not even the witches. And if the Guards can't teach the Lord Gawyn enough about soldiering, well, they've soldiers in Illian, too. And in Shienar, and Tear, for that matter. I'm a good Queen's man, but...”

The night turned into a battle between the exhaustion of Mat's body and the suspicion of his mind, a battle where no side got the decisive edge. Mat's head would dip deeper and deeper until his chin hit his chest, and his head would shoot up straight. The farmer's voice would go from a steady, soporific drone to a collection of sharp and jagged words. Then his mind would begin to drift and dull again, until his head began to dip steadily, relentlessly toward his chest, and the cycle started again.

It wasn't until al'Thor shook him by the shoulder that Mat realized his fatigue had won out.

“Wake up, Mat,” al'Thor said. “We're there. We're here.”

“Caemlyn,” Almen Bunt said from the driver's seat. “The greatest city in the world.”

Not Like the Fox, Not Like the Rabbit

Elyas pushed for speed across the brown grass flatland as if trying to make up for the time spent with the Traveling People, setting such a pace southward that even Bela seemed grateful to stop when the twilight deepened. And though they moved faster than they had before, they also moved more cautiously. No fires at night unless dead wood already lay on the ground; they were not to break so much as a twig off of a standing tree. When he did make a fire, it was small, always hidden in a pit where he had carefully cut away a plug of sod. As soon as their meal was prepared, he buried the coals and replaced the plug. Before they set out again in the grey pre-dawn, he went over the campsite inch by inch to make sure there was no sign that anyone had ever been there. It never took him more than a few minutes, but they did not leave until he was satisfied.

Three days it went like this, and they fell into a nearly silent routine. At first Egwene had asked questions— were the trollocs back? did darkfriends chase them?— but Elyas had just scowled and shook his head, dodging the question by barking at them to move faster. Now she just let the cloud of fear sit over them. Silent Elyas was better than barking Elyas.

The land became long, rolling crests, too low to be called hills. A carpet of tough, dry grass spread before them, rippled by an east wind that had nothing to cut it for a hundred miles. The groves of trees grew more meager and scattered. The sky was dull and leaden, and the sun gave no warmth.

Elyas's eyes searched constantly, scanning in every direction, sometimes staring as if they saw something besides miles and miles of the same coarse

grass that was under their feet. Whether they did or no, Egwene saw nothing, and Perrin saw the same.

The occasional long ridge stretched miles and miles to east and west, too wide to avoid. Elyas still would not let them simply cross over, though. Leaving them at the base of the slope, he would creep up to the crest on his belly and peer over cautiously. Waiting at the bottom of the ridge, minutes passed like hours. Egwene chewed her lip and unconsciously clicked Aram's beads. The weight of wondering, of not knowing, lay heavy on her, and her stomach twisted up in a sick knot.

Every time, Elyas searched north and south, east and west, only his eyes raised above the ridge. Every time, the way ahead was clear, and he motioned them to come forward. And every time, they crossed over without incident and resumed their march forward—until the next time they found a ridge too wide to go around.

At the third such ridge, Egwene and Perrin waited at the base of the ridge, watching Elyas climb. Egwene sat ahorse, and Perrin was leaning against Bela and scratching under her chin. When Elyas was halfway up the ridge, Perrin stood up straight.

“I—” He swallowed. “I’m going up, too.”

“Perrin!” she said in her loudest whisper, but he was gone, scrambling up after the man with the yellow eyes. She jumped down to chase after him, but realized right off that she couldn’t leave Bela alone, and she couldn’t get the mare to crawl up the ridge. The two of them would have to wait for Elyas’s signal before climbing the ridge.

Perrin caught Elyas up quickly, and the two of them made their way to the crest. Well before reaching it, Elyas pulled Perrin to the ground and they wriggled forward the last few paces on their bellies. At the top, Elyas took off his hat before raising his head up slowly. Perrin followed suit. Egwene, wanting to feel a part of the group, looked around, as well, but of course saw nothing they hadn’t seen on their way to the foot of the ridge.

She peered up at Elyas and Perrin, but they made no sign of moving. Then Perrin started to stand, but stopped short when a flock of ravens— fifty black birds, a hundred— spiraled into the sky from the other side of the ridge. Perrin froze in a crouch as the birds swarmed overhead.

As if one thought had suddenly sparked in their hundred tiny minds, every raven broke sharply to the south. The flock disappeared over the next rise, already descending. Then another sprang into the air, this one from the east. The black mass wheeled twice and headed south, after the first flock. Their wings beat a thunder down from the sky. With her eyes shut tight, Egwene ducked down until she felt Bela's mane scratching against her chest and wrapped her arms around the mare's neck.

When Egwene raised her head again, Perrin and Elyas were exchanging hushed words up above. Then Elyas took one last look over the crest, rose and waved at her to bring Bela up. Egwene kicked Bela into a trot and reached Perrin about halfway down the other side of the ridge.

“Elyas says he knows someplace safe,” Perrin said. “Safe from ravens, anyway.”

“Where?”

“I don't know. South. He ain't sure we can make it afore full dark.”

Perrin was running full speed now, and they reached Elyas quickly.

“We can't go full speed,” Elyas said, “or we might overtake those ravens. We'll just have to hope we've no ravens on our tail. Luckily, this isn't a big hunt.”

Egwene looked at Perrin, whose jaw hung a little slack. She realized hers was doing the same and quickly snapped it shut. “Back home you won't see that many ravens in a whole year,” she said.

Elyas shook his head. “In the Borderlands, I've seen sweeps with a thousand ravens to the flock. Not too often. There's a bounty on ravens

there, you know— they call them ‘the Dark One’s eyes.’ But it has happened.” With that he stopped talking, and for a while they all seemed to save their breath for running.

When they reached the next ridge, Egwene hopped off Bela and led her just short of the top, then left her a few steps behind so the mare would not be visible from the other side. She wanted to see what Elyas and Perrin were seeing, and even if she had to take the time to mount Bela, the horse would be able to catch up quickly with the other two on foot.

“Do ravens ever double back?” Perrin wondered aloud.

Egwene shuddered. *A fine thing it’d be to reach the crest at the same time as a flock of ravens.*

They inched their heads up until they could just see over to the other side. Perrin let out a sigh of relief, and Egwene smiled. The only thing there was a copse of trees a little to the west. No ravens. Then a fox burst out of the trees, running hard, and ravens exploded from the branches after it. The beat of their wings almost drowned out the fox’s desperate whining. The fox snapped its jaws at the black whirlwind that dove and swirled around it. The birds darted in and darted away untouched, their black beaks glistening wetly. The fox turned back, hoping to find safety in the trees. It ran awkwardly now, head low, fur dark and bloody, and the ravens flapped around it, more and more of them at once, the fluttering mass thickening until it hid the fox completely. Then, as suddenly as they had descended, the ravens rose, wheeled, and vanished over the next rise to the south. A misshapen lump of torn fur marked what had been the fox.

Egwene swallowed hard. *That could be— they could do that to us. A hundred ravens. They could—*

“Move,” Elyas said, jumping up and setting off without waiting. “Move, burn you!” he called over his shoulder. “Move!”

Egwene leapt onto Bela and kicked her into a canter, catching Perrin less than halfway to the bottom of the slope. She slowed a little and pulled

alongside him. Below them, Elyas was just reaching the copse of trees that had hidden the ravens. “We could double up,” she said.

Perrin didn’t answer; he just lowered his head and ran harder. He stumbled and his arms windmilled until he caught himself just short of going flat on his face. When Elyas reached the copse he turned and waved at them to hurry. Just then a lone raven winged out of the trees. It tilted toward Egwene and Perrin, then screamed and spun south toward the rest of the flock. Egwene reached for her sling and kicked Bela into a gallop. The trot was too uneven to get a good shot off, and the raven would quickly be out of reach if she pulled Bela to a stop. She slipped a stone in the pouch and swung the sling behind her and once around her head, then let fly. The raven folded up in mid-air and fell heavily to the ground. She turned back to Perrin and smiled as he slowed to a jog, his mouth open in disbelief or amazement. *Or both.*

“Don’t stand there counting your toes!” Elyas called.

Egwene had veered off course to track the raven down, so she arrived at the trees at almost the same time as Perrin, who jumped out of the way to avoid being caught underfoot.

Far to the west, almost out of sight, what seemed like a dark mist rose into the air. It swirled northward for a moment, then broke off and flashed to the south. Just like the rest.

“Do you think they saw us?” Perrin asked through gasping breaths. “We were already in the trees, weren’t we? They couldn’t see us at that distance. Could they? Not that far off.”

“*We saw them* at that distance,” Elyas said with half a smile. Egwene shifted uneasily, and Perrin hung his head with his hands on his knees, still fighting to get his wind back. “Think, if you want to stay alive. If they had seen us, they’d have been down on us like they were on that fox. Let fear cloud your mind at it will be the end of you. They’re gone, now, and we should be, too.” He turned to Egwene. “Keep that sling handy. Might be useful again.”

They left the copse, angling westward from the line of march they had been following. Egwene felt her heart racing, in part from exertion, but in part from seeing that they seemed almost to be chasing after the last ravens they had seen. Elyas kept on tirelessly, and there was nothing for it but follow him. *A safe place. He knows a safe place.*

They ran to the next hill, then waited till the ravens moved on. Ran again, then waited. Ran, waited. Traveling over uneven country is taxing enough when going at a steady clip. This jerky pace quickly began to tire everyone but Elyas. Even Bela was flagging.

Egwene hoped never to see so many ravens again. To the left and right the black birds billowed up, and ahead to the south. A dozen times they reached the cover of a grove or the scant shelter of a slope just moments before ravens swept into the sky. Once, with the sun beginning to slide from its midday height, they stood in the open, frozen like statues, half a mile from the nearest cover, while a hundred of the Dark One's feathered spies flashed by a bare mile to the east. The cold wind felt colder against the sweat on Egwene's face and arms and neck. She looked over and saw Perrin blinking away the sweat trickling into his eye. They didn't move until the last black shape dwindled to a dot and vanished.

Egwene and Perrin both brought down stragglers with their slings, enough that she soon lost count. But though they littered the ground they traveled, it was not the ravens' corpses that stood out in Egwene's mind, but their victims'. The eyeless rabbit whose head stood upright, with its legs and entrails and other bits scattered in a rough circle around it. Or the birds—the ravens' own cousins—stabbed to shapeless masses of feathers. Or the pair of foxes that had fared no better than the first one they had seen, what seemed like days before.

To her left, Perrin stumbled a little, then exchanged a look with Elyas. At first Egwene took it for a sign of fatigue, but Perrin's eyes did not look tired. They looked nervous, frightened, ashamed. And they stayed locked with Elyas's, neither of them saying a word. Elyas seemed almost to be waiting on Perrin, but waiting for what?

“Ravens,” Perrin finally said. “Behind us.”

It took Egwene a moment to register his words, and she gasped as she caught their full meaning. “He was right,” she said. “You can talk to them.”

Perrin closed his eyes and turned away, then looked back at Egwene. “Behind us. I don’t know exactly what— screaming birds, diving and whirling and diving again, their beaks sticky with blood. But the wolves, they fought. Fought them off. They don’t go down near so easy as foxes, and the ravens, they ain’t care about the wolves. They’re headed this way, now. That’s what— that’s what the wolves say.” Perrin took a breath. “The wolves are coming, too, but they say that danger comes before. They won’t beat the ravens.”

Egwene tried to make sense of all she had just heard. Perrin could talk to wolves. He could talk to them without sound, without even being in the same place. And these wolves, they were coming right for the three humans and their packhorse. But the wolves weren’t the danger. No, that was the ravens.

It was a lot for a girl from sheep country to take in.

Perrin staggered again, regaining his balance by holding onto Egwene’s stirrup. She pulled Bela up to a stop.

“Enough,” she said, hopping down. Perrin protested weakly that he could keep on even as Egwene pushed him up into the saddle. But her skirts were even worse for running than they were for riding, and they soon switched places again. Egwene thought back to that girl in Baerlon that had kissed her, and how she had worn trousers, and how much she wished at that moment to be wearing trousers herself.

Elyas did not slow down. He urged them, and taunted them, and kept them so close behind the searching ravens to the south that Egwene thought all it would take would be for one bird to look back.

“The ravens behind,” Perrin said to Elyas. “Two hours?”

“One, I think,” Elyas said. “Wolves don’t know hours or minutes, but they know the sun, and think it will be kissing the horizon when the birds catch us. An hour till they’re on us, and a good two till sunset, two more to full dark.”

Perrin staggered a little, and Egwene slowed in case he needed to hold on to her stirrup again. When Elyas was out of earshot she turned to Perrin.

“Perrin, ho,” she said, and looked him in the eye. “I’ll not die like that wretched fox, nor that rabbit, neither.”

Perrin stared back blankly, and she nodded at his great axe. He glanced at the blade, then turned back to her. “Egwene, no!”

“Yes. *Yes.*” She caught something in the corner of her eye and looked up. The ravens ahead of them seemed to vanish suddenly. Dark, misty clouds still floated in the skies far to the east and west, but ahead... nothing.

Then a chill ran through her, a sudden, clean tingle as if she had jumped into the Winespring Water in midwinter. It rippled through her and seemed to carry away some of her fatigue. But it also took away something... deeper. She could not say what, but she was sure she felt different. That she had lost something. To her left, Perrin stumbled to a halt and looked around. Egwene pulled Bela up short and circled back to Perrin.

Elyas was stopped ahead of them, watching them with his hands on his knees. *Well, at least we know that even he gets winded after a while.* He had a gleam in his eye, and she was sure he knew what the tingle was. He said nothing, though.

“That felt... strange,” Egwene said.

“What was it?” asked Perrin. “What just happened?”

Elyas barked out a laugh. “Safety, that’s what. We made it, you bloody fools. No raven will cross that line. Not one as spies for the Dark One, anyways. A trolloc would have to be driven across, and something fierce

would need to push the myrddraal to make it do the driving. It's safety you feel."

"Safety?" Egwene asked. "I feel... What is this place? I don't think I like it. It's strange... I feel as if I've lost something."

"Yes, baby Aes Sedai," Elyas said. "You *have*. The One Power won't work in a *stedding*. You can't touch the True Source here, can't even feel it. Makes Aes Sedai itch inside. But when it comes to ravens, that feeling is safety."

A *stedding*. Egwene looked around. The land seemed at first to be unchanged from the rolling hills and ridges they had crossed the whole day, but then she noticed green shoots among the grass. Not many, and they were struggling, but more than they had seen anywhere else. Fewer weeds in the grass, too. This place was healthy. Growing. A *stedding*.

"Of course," Elyas said, "there hasn't been an ogier here in three thousand odd years, not since the Breaking, but it's the *stedding* makes the ogier, not the other way round."

"The *stedding* is real?" Perrin asked. "Ogier are real."

"Yes," Elyas said. "Now come on. We'd better get deeper inside. The ravens can't follow, but they can still see us this close to the edge."

"Why don't we stay here?" Perrin said, breathing hard. He was forcing one or two words out at a time between deep, wracking breaths. "If it's really a *stedding*, we'd be safe. No trollocs. No Aes Sedai. Why don't we just stay here?"

"Till when?" Elyas asked, raising an eyebrow. "What would you eat? Grass, like the horse? Besides, there's others know about this place, and nothing keeps men out, not even the worst of them. And around here, there's just one place to find water." Frowning uneasily, he turned in a complete circle, scanning the land. "We take our chances on a choice of evils, and the ravens are sure. Come on. It's only another mile or two."

Huge boulders began to dot the low hills— irregular lumps of grey, lichen-coated stone half buried in the ground, some as big as houses. Here and there amid the desiccated brown of brambles and brush a lone green shoot announced that this place was different. It was not immune from whatever wounded the land beyond its borders, but here the wound did not go quite as deep.

They straggled in silence over rise after rise, each lost in thoughts private from the others. Egwene was thinking about the *stedding*. It was uncomfortable, the subtle emptiness where she should have felt the True Source. She took it as encouraging, though, that she noticed the absence at all. She wondered how much bigger the loss would feel to a full-fledged Aes Sedai.

“Hal” Elyas said as they approached the base of a hill, bursting the bubble of silence. They had come upon a pool of water sparkling in the dying sunlight. It was small— any of them could have waded across it in two strides— but it was clear and clean enough to show the sandy bottom like a sheet of glass. Perrin threw himself full length on the ground and plunged his head in. After a three count he was out and sputtering from the cold. He shook his head, his long hair spraying a rain of drops, and Egwene laughed and splashed back at him. His eyes grew sober and lines creased his forehead. She opened her mouth to speak, to try to bring their friendship back from the brink of mercy, but he stuck his face back in the water. She took a couple of long drinks from the pool, then went to help Elyas fix supper.

There was nothing left but cheese and dried meat; there had been no chance to hunt. Still, Egwene worked cheerfully, laughing and joking as they prepared the scanty fare. And at least there was tea. Perrin did his share to help, but he did it silently, and he wouldn’t look Egwene in the eye. *Maybe it was wrong to ask him.* She shook her head. *I **won’t** die like that fox.* *Friendship means doing the hard things as well as the fun ones.* They began their meal in silence as the sun grew red in the west, and their shadows stretched out long and thin.

For once Elyas had broken his rule about fires. There were no trees, but he had snapped dead branches from the brush and built his fire against a huge chunk of rock sticking out of the hillside. The layers of soot staining the stone made it plain that they were just the latest in a long line of travelers to use the site so, a line stretching back generations.

Much of the big rock was buried, but what they could see was somewhat rounded, with a sharp break on one side where moss, old and brown, covered the ragged surface. The grooves and hollows eroded in the rounded part looked odd. Egwene studied it as she ate.

“That,” she said finally, “looks like an eye.” Perrin turned to the stone, then back to Egwene.

“It is,” Elyas said. He sat with his back to the fire and the rock, studying the land around them while he chewed a strip of dried meat. “Artur Hawkwing’s eye. The eye of the High King himself. This is what his power and glory came to, in the end.” He said it absently; his eyes and his attention were on the hills.

“Artur Hawkwing!” Egwene exclaimed. “You’re joking with me. It isn’t an eye at all. Why would somebody carve Artur Hawkwing’s eye on a rock out here?”

Elyas glanced over his shoulder at her and snorted. “What do they teach you village whelps?” He turned back to the hills but went on talking. “Artur Paendrag Tanreall, Artur Hawkwing, the High King, united every nation, city, and village from the Great Blight to the Sea of Storms, from the Aryth Ocean to the Aiel Waste. Even some beyond the Waste. He even sent armies the other side of the Aryth Ocean. He never ruled the whole world, whatever the stories say, but what he really did rule was enough for anyone. And he brought peace and justice to the land.”

“All stood equal before the law,” Perrin said, “and no man raised his hand against another.”

“So you’ve heard the stories, at least.” Elyas chuckled— a dry sound— and turned around to face them. “He brought peace and justice, but he did it with fire and sword. A child could ride alone with a bag of gold from the Aryth Ocean to the Spine of the World and never have a moment’s fear, but the High King’s justice was as hard as that rock there for anyone who challenged his power, even if it was just by being who they were, or by *looking* like a challenge in the eyes of others. So for twenty years, Hawkwing’s armies laid siege to Tar Valon. The common folk had peace, and justice, and full bellies, but every Aes Sedai had a thousand gold crowns on her head.”

So much fear and hate for Aes Sedai. It’s a hard world I ride into.

Elyas paused to take out his pipe and light it, then continued. “Artur Hawkwing was foolish in his pride. An Aes Sedai healer could have saved him when he took sick— or was poisoned, as some say— but every Aes Sedai still alive was behind the Shining Walls, using all her Power to hold off an army so large its campfires made the night seem like day. He wouldn’t have let one near him, anyway. By the end of his life, he hated Aes Sedai as much as he hated the Dark One.”

Egwene’s mouth tightened.

“What does all that have to do with that there stone being Artur Hawkwing’s eye?” Perrin asked.

Elyas puffed on his pipe. “When he had united all the lands, the High King decided to build a capital— a new city, not connected to any old cause or faction or rivalry. He’d build it here, at the very center of the land bordered by the Blight to the north, and the Waste to the east, and the seas to the west and the south. Here, where no Aes Sedai would ever come willingly, or be able to use the Power if she did. A capital from which, one day, the whole world would receive peace and justice. When they heard the proclamation, the common people subscribed enough money to build a monument to him. They loved him true, you see. The King was a harsh man, but never with the common folk. To most, he was just a step below the Creator, and a short

step at that. It took five years to carve and build. A statue of Hawkwing, himself, a hundred times bigger than the man. They raised it right here, and the city was to rise around it.”

Egwene looked about. “There was never any city here. If there were, *something* would have to be left.”

Elyas nodded, then turned back to his watch. “Indeed there was not. Artur Hawkwing died the very day the statue was finished, and his children and the rest of his blood fought over who would sit on the man’s throne. The statue stood alone in the midst of these hills. Artur Paendrag’s blood died out, most killed by one another. That didn’t stop the fighting, of course, and it was the beginning of the War of the Hundred Years. Lasted a hundred and twenty-three, really, and most of that history was lost in the smoke of burning towns. And after the wars had scarred and pitted the land, and one kingdom had become twenty-four, there were those who would have erased even the memory of Hawkwing, if they could. Books were burned just because they mentioned his name, and sometime during those years the statue was pulled down. Maybe men couldn’t stand measuring themselves against it any longer. In the end there was nothing left of him but the stories, and most of them wrong. That’s what his glory came to.”

“First you sound as if you despise him,” Egwene said, “and now you sound as if you admire him.” She shook her head.

Elyas turned to look at her, a flat, unblinking stare. He opened his mouth to say something, but she never found out what. First his eyes seemed to glaze over, then he and Perrin sprang to their feet together. Perrin shook himself and took a deep breath, but Elyas never paused. As soon as he was standing, he was stepping toward the fire.

“Douse it! Put it out!” Elyas said, but before Egwene could even stand he had pushed roughly past her and snatched up the tea kettle, cursing when it burned his hands. He still managed to upend it over the fire, and Perrin, who was just a step behind him, arrived in time to start kicking dirt over the

hissing coals as the last of the tea splashed into the fire, hissing and rising in tendrils of steam. He did not stop until the last spark was buried.

Egwene was standing now, but had no idea what to do, or why the men were doing what they were doing. The flurry of activity and the alarm in their eyes and voices had her heart racing.

“No chance to hide that somebody’s been here,” Elyas said. “We’ll just have to hurry and hope. Maybe they won’t bother. Blood and ashes, but I was sure it was the ravens.”

Hurriedly Perrin tossed the saddle on Bela and tightened the girth.

“What is it?” Egwene asked. She heard her voice shaking. “Trollocs? A fade?”

“Go east or west,” Elyas said. “Find a place to hide, and I’ll join you as soon as I can. If they find out what we are, what she is— if they even see a wolf...” He didn’t finish. He just darted away, crouching almost as if he meant to go on all fours, and vanished into the lengthening shadows of evening.

“Perrin, *what* is going on?” Egwene asked, gathering her few belongings as he did the same.

He turned to her. “Men. And not the good kind.” He helped her into the saddle and slapped Bela to get her going. Trotting alongside, holding the axe across his chest in both hands, he looked up at Egwene. “It’s the Children, Egwene. Whitecloaks are coming.”

Caemlyn

Mat shook himself awake and set his eyes on Caemlyn. He had thought Baerlon was a real city, and even in ruins Shadar Logoth seemed as grand a capital as could be. He thought he knew what to expect when he saw Caemlyn, but he would never have believed, could never have imagined, what he looked on now.

Buildings clustered outside the great wall as if all the towns they had passed through were gathered together in one bunch. They looked like piglets at a sow's belly, each fighting for a teat, hoping to grow up as big as Ma. Inns thrust their upper storeys above the tile roofs of houses. Squat warehouses, broad and windowless, shouldered against them all. Red brick and grey stone and plastered white, jumbled and mixed together, spread as far as the eye could see.

And the wall itself— fifty feet of pale grey stone, streaked with silver and white, sweeping out in a great circle to the north and south till he wondered how far it must run. All along its length, round towers rose high above the wall's own height, each topped with red-and-white banners whipping in the wind. Beyond the wall Mat could see the tops of other towers, taller, more slender than those along the wall, and domes gleaming white and gold in the sun. *It's like a city from the stories, only grander.*

Almen Bunt's cart creaked down the wide road toward Caemlyn's gate, a vaulting archway in the stone that could have let a giant through, or ten giants abreast. Unwalled markets lined the road on both sides, roof tiles glistening red and purple, with stalls and pens in the spaces between. Calves bawled, cattle lowed, geese honked, chickens clucked, goats bleated, sheep

baaed, and people bargained at the top of their lungs. A wall of noise funneled them toward the gate. It was a wonder the sound of it hadn't awoken him from miles away.

"What did I tell you?" Bunt near had to shout just to be heard. "The grandest city in the world. Built by ogier, you know. Least, the Inner City and the Palace were. It's that old, Caemlyn is. Where good Queen Morgase, the Light illumine her, makes the law and holds the peace for Andor. The greatest city on earth."

It was easy to see what Bunt meant, but Mat saw it much differently. In a city with this many people, how would they know who was trustworthy? Any of these people could be darkfriends, or worse. In a city this crowded, with this little breathing room, where could they possibly hide? Mat looked at al'Thor, who was grinning like a child on Bel Tine.

"This is a nightmare," Mat said, shouting over the noise. "How will we ever find a safe spot in this swarm of a city?"

"Mat, look at this place," al'Thor said with a laugh. "It's as safe as we could hope for. How will anyone find us among so many? You may have a fool's eyes, but surely you can see that."

"If you're right, you can give up hope of finding the others here. And that's if they ain't dead already. Ask me, they're probably just as cold as the gleeman."

The grin faded from al'Thor's face, and he turned to watch the gate as they approached. Mat grunted. *Can't help it if the truth is disagreeable, can I?* As they drew closer, the wall came to dominate the entire sky, and seemed to stretch for eternity in either direction. Mat felt a dread welling up in his gut. The crowd grew thicker as they went, jostling together shoulder to shoulder, pressing against the carts and wagons heading in. Many of the travelers were dusty young men afoot with little in the way of belongings, just like Mat and al'Thor. Most of the people Mat saw had a road-weary look—rickety carts and tired horses; clothes wrinkled from many nights of sleeping rough; dragging steps and tired eyes. But weary or not, those eyes

were all fixed on the gate as if getting inside the walls would strip away all their fatigue, solve all their problems. Mat was sure that was a lie.

Half a dozen of the Queen's Guards stood at the gates. It was an ugly sight to Mat, these men with their clean red-and-white tabards and burnished plate-and-mail while most of the people streaming under the stone arch wore little more than rags. Backs rigid and heads straight, the guards eyed the incomers with disdainful wariness. *They'd send us all back where we came from if they could.* Aside from keeping a way clear for traffic leaving the city, though, and having a hard word with those who tried to push too fast, they did not hinder anyone.

"Keep your places. Don't push. Don't push, the Light blind you! There's room for everybody. Keep your places."

Bunt's cart rolled through the arch with the slow tide of the throng. They were inside.

The city rose on low hills, like steps climbing to a center. Another wall encircled that center, shining pure white and running over the hills. Inside that were even more towers and domes, white and gold and purple, looking down on the rest of Caemlyn from atop the hills. That had to be Bunt's "Inner City."

The Caemlyn Road itself changed as soon as it passed under the arch, becoming a grand boulevard, split down the middle by broad strips of grass and trees. It was wider here, but no less crowded. Most of the people simply went about their business— laughing, talking, arguing as people do. But some looked shifty to Mat, and some carried weapons.

The cart turned sharply and Mat nearly lost his balance. Now they were on a side street, narrower than the boulevard but still twice as wide as any road in Emond's Field. Bunt drew the horse to a halt and looked back around at them hesitantly. The traffic was a bit lighter here; the crowd split around the cart without breaking stride.

"What you're hiding under your cloak, is it really what Holdwin says?"

“What do you mean?” al’ Thor asked. He was already tossing his saddlebag over his shoulder, and he didn’t even twitch at the question. His voice was steady, too.

Mat pretended to yawn and slipped his hand under his coat. His eyes narrowed as he wrapped his fingers around the hilt of his dagger. He was tempted to tug the scarf around his head lower, but didn’t want to draw Bunt’s eyes.

“Don’t mean nothing, I suppose,” the driver said. “Look, now, if you heard I was coming to Caemlyn, you were there long enough to hear the rest. Was I after a reward, I’d have made some excuse to go find Holdwin in the Goose and Crown. Only I don’t like Holdwin much, and I don’t like that friend of his at all. Shady character. Seems like he wants you boys more than anything you might... well, anything else.”

“I don’t know what he wants,” al’ Thor said. “We’ve never seen him before.”

Mat smiled a little. *Probably true. Can’t tell one fake from another.*

“Uh-huh. Well, like I say, I don’t know nothing, and I guess I don’t want to. There’s enough trouble around for everybody without I go looking for more.”

Al’ Thor nodded and was down on the ground quickly. Mat took a little longer to gather his things. He didn’t much trust Bunt— why would he be asking so many questions if he weren’t after something?— but trusted the strangers in the street even less. He got everything on his back except his quarterstaff and hopped down. The staff he would use as a walking stick, ready to strike if the need arose.

Bunt leaned over and beckoned al’ Thor closer. The driver looked sneaky and secretive, so Mat walked just behind al’ Thor, listening closely.

“I’d hide that, lad.” The old farmer nodded slightly at al’ Thor’s cloak, where you could see the bulge of the sword hilt if you knew what you were

looking for. People pushed by on both sides of the cart but, except for the handful that cursed them for blocking the way, no one paid them any mind. “Stop wearing it. Hide it, sell it, give it away. That’s my advice. Thing like that’ll draw attention, and my guess is you don’t want any of that.”

Done giving advice no one asked for, he straightened, clucked to his horse, and drove slowly on down the crowded street without another word or a backward glance. They had to jump away from a wagon loaded with barrels rumbling down the street, and when Mat looked up again, Bunt and his cart were gone.

“What do we do now?” Mat asked. He licked his lips, trying to notice every detail about the people pushing by and the buildings towering as much as six storeys above and the streets and alleys he could run down if needed. “We’re in Caemlyn, like you wanted. But what do we do?” A hum lay on the city, the low, steady drone of hundreds of shops working, thousands of people talking. It was like being inside a giant beehive, constantly buzzing, and it made it hard to think. “Even if they are here, al’Thor, how could we find them in all of this?”

“Moiraine S— Moiraine will find us,” al’Thor said slowly. At least he hadn’t said “Sedai.” The last thing they needed was for someone to hear them talking about Aes Sedai or fades or darkfriends or whatever bloody else was like to slip from their mouths.

“Aye?” Mat said. “And what if she doesn’t? What if nobody does but the—the—” He didn’t want to say the word, and he could see that al’Thor caught his meaning.

“We’ll think about that when it happens,” he said. “*If* it happens. Now, Thom said to find an inn called The Queen’s Blessing. We’ll go there first.”

“How? We can’t afford one meal between the two of us.”

“At least it’s a place to start. Thom thought we could find help there.”

“I can’t—” he started, then dropped his eyes to the paving stones, trying to shut out the sea of people surrounding them. “They’re everywhere, al’ Thor. Wherever we go, they’re right behind us— or worse, waiting for us. They’ll be at The Queen’s Blessing, too. Nothing will stop them. Nothing will stop a—”

Al’ Thor grabbed Mat’s collar in a fist. “Hey, look here,” he said, his voice a hoarse whisper. “We’ve made it this far, haven’t we? Me and you. They haven’t caught us yet. We can make it all the way, but not if we quit. I won’t just quit and wait for them like a sheep for slaughter. Now are you going to stand here till you starve to death? Or until they come pick you up in a sack? Or are you going to help me find this bloody inn?”

He let go of Mat and turned away. Mat thought of all they had been through, just the two of them, since Shadar Logoth. *Perrin was right. He ain’t near so bad as I thought. Maybe he’s just a little odd on account of growing up out in the bloody Westwood, no sisters or brothers, no Ma.* Maybe they could make it. But Mat wasn’t about to trust a single person in this city, whatever al’ Thor thought.

“Al’ Thor,” he said. “I’m— I’m sorry.”

Al’ Thor let out a long breath and started down the street. “Forget it,” he said.

Mat kept his eyes down, looking up just enough to keep from walking into people. “I-I-I can’t stop thinking I’ll never see home again. I want to go home. Laugh if you want; I don’t care. If I had anything, I’d give it all just to have my ma giving me what for over some nothing right now. Strangers all around, and no way to know if we can trust anyone. Feels like Emond’s Field is clear across the world. We’re alone, and we’ll never get home. We’re going to die, al’ Thor.”

“Sure we will, and everybody does, but not yet. We’ll be needing these bodies a while longer. I’m not ready to curl up and wait for the Wheel to turn.”

Al' Thor started asking directions to The Queen's Blessing. Most people either shrugged without a word or cursed them for not staying where they belonged. Some people stalked on by with no more than a glance, if that. A broad-faced man, nearly as big as Perrin, cocked his head and said, "The Queen's Blessing, eh? You country boys Queen's men?" He wore a white cockade on his wide-brimmed hat, and a white armband on his long coat. "Well, you've come too late."

He went off roaring with laughter. Al' Thor looked puzzled and a little amused, but the man made Mat wary. Why was he laughing at them? What did his question mean? Were the white cockade and armband misdirection, a disguise for a darkfriend, or did they have some other, equally dangerous meaning?

The crowd around them was filled with odd folk, people unlike anyone Mat had ever seen. Some stood out with skin white as bone or dark as pitch, coats of strange cut or bright colors, hats with pointed peaks or long feathers. He saw men with tattooed necks and faces, men wearing shoes with soles as tall as his hand, men with their hair in braids longer than Nynaeve's. He saw women with veils across their faces, women in stiff dresses as wide as they were tall, women who left more skin bare than any tavernmaid he'd ever seen.

It wasn't just foot traffic, either. The occasional carriage, all vivid paint and gilt, squeezed through the throng behind a four- or six-horse team. Sedan chairs were everywhere, the polemen pushing along without a care for who they shoved aside. One man pushed back, starting a fight that sent the sedan chair toppling onto its side. The pale-skinned man who climbed out didn't make it clear of the scuffle before two toughs jumped on him, taking his red-striped coat and whatever else he had on his person. An agitated murmur started rolling through the crowd that had stopped to watch, and Mat and Al' Thor hurried on.

Al' Thor went on asking anyone who looked the least bit friendly if they knew where the Queen's Blessing was. Mat was busy fending off the many hustlers selling false Dragon mementos. They were offered enough

fragments of Logain's sword to make three swords and a dagger, and enough scraps of his cloak to make an entire cloak and a matching suit.

"Mat," al'Thor said, "look at how these people dress up their swords. If I did that, I reckon it'd be less likely to draw attention. You know, the herons."

Mat looked at the crowd. All the Caemlyn men's swords were wound, sheath and hilt, in strips of cloth— red bound with white cord, or white bound with red. Even some of the strangers' swords had the decorations.

"Aye, I reckon so," Mat said. "Following local fashion is a good way to blend in. But wouldn't it be easier and smarter just to sell the sword? Ain't like you even know how to use it. Not really."

"No!" The fire in al'Thor's voice surprised Mat. "It's the last thing I have from home, from my father. I'm keeping it. Period."

He turned and walked back toward a shop they had just passed. The front table had the cloth and cord on display, in both colors. Mat followed behind, muttering to himself. Al'Thor picked out a red cloth and white cord — it was the cheaper of the two, though Mat could see no difference apart from the color— then handed almost all of his remaining coppers to the shopkeeper.

"We well's to give him all the coin we have left," Mat said with a scowl. "Same difference anyhow."

Al'Thor asked if there were a place he could wrap his sword, and the shopkeeper swept them into the alley and dusted his hands off. "You make any trouble," the man said, "and there's a hundred men in sound of my voice will take care of you even if the Guards won't." He spat, just missing al'Thor's foot. "Get on now."

Mat took his staff in both hands, but al'Thor pulled him away before he could even get in his stance. Mat kept looking back over his shoulder as al'Thor tugged him deeper into the alleyway. Then, with Mat in front of

him blocking any wandering eyes from the street, al' Thor pulled off the sword belt and set to wrapping the sheath and hilt.

"I'll bet he charged you double for that bloody cloth," Mat said. "Triple. They'll all be trying to cheat us. They think we've come to see the false Dragon, like these other fools. They're like to hit us on the head while we sleep, take your sword and my dagger and everything else they can. This is no place to be, with so many people. Let's away, now. If we can't go home, let's just *go*."

"I'm staying," al' Thor said, standing up and wrapping the belt back around his waist. "If the others aren't here already, they will be soon or late, looking for us. At least we shouldn't have any trouble about a heron-mark sword."

Then he just started back toward the larger street, leaving Mat no choice but to follow. *Would he just leave me here?* No, Mat had asked, and al' Thor had said no. And Mat believed him. He had to trust someone, right? Even if it were Rand al' Thor. Still, it would bear watching.

Bit by bit, al' Thor did get the directions he wanted. At first they were vague — "somewhere in that direction" or "over that way." The nearer they came, though, the clearer the instructions, until at last they stood before a broad stone building with a sign over the door creaking in the wind. A man knelt before a woman with red-gold hair and a crown, one of her hands resting on his bowed head. The Queen's Blessing.

"Are you sure about this?" Mat asked. They were the first words he'd said since the alley.

"Of course," al' Thor said. But he took a deep breath all the same before he pushed open the door.

The common room was large and paneled with dark wood, kept warm by two hearth fires on either side. A serving maid was sweeping the floor and another was polishing candlesticks in the corner. Each smiled at them when they walked in, then went back to her work.

Only a few tables had people at them, but a dozen men was far from empty for so early in the day. The patrons weren't exactly cheery, but at least they looked clean and sober. The smells of roasting beef and baking bread drifted from the kitchen, and Mat felt his stomach grumble. They hadn't eaten in two days.

The innkeeper was a round man with a pink face and a starched white apron. He had his greying hair combed back over a bald spot that it did not quite cover. He looked them over, head to toe, and introduced himself.

"Hello, young masters," he said with a pleasant smile. "My name is Basel Gill, and welcome to The Queen's Blessing. How may I help you this morning?"

"Master Gill," al'Thor said, "a friend of ours told us to come here. Thom Merrilin. He—" The innkeeper's smile slipped. Al'Thor gave Mat a worried look before pressing on. "Is something wrong? You do know him?"

"I know him," Gill said curtly. "Come with me." He jerked his head toward the back. Al'Thor followed a step before stopping to tug Mat along. Mat didn't like the way this was turning out.

In the kitchen, Master Gill paused to speak to the cook, a round woman with her hair in a bun at the back of her head. She kept stirring her pots while Master Gill talked. The smells were so good that Mat nearly lost track of what was happening. Al'Thor had to give him another tug before he realized that Master Gill was leading them out the back door. In the stableyard, the innkeeper looked around to make sure no one was close, then rounded on them.

"You say you know a man named Thom Merrilin," he said to al'Thor. "Why should I believe you, or that you were friends and not foes?"

Al'Thor gave Mat a puzzled look, then smiled and turned back to the innkeeper. "Here," he said, then went to a knee and pulled Thom's old cloak out of his pack. He unfolded it, revealing the colored patches and the

instrument cases. “Thom’s things.” Al’ Thor opened the smaller case to show the gold-and-silver-chased flute within.

Master Gill did not take his eyes off al’ Thor. “Aye, I recognize them. I saw him play the flute often enough, and you ain’t like to find two such outside a royal court.” The innkeeper narrowed his eyes till they were sharp as knives. The pleasant smile from the common room was long gone. “How did you come by these things? Thom would part with his arm as soon as those instruments.”

“He gave them to me.” Al’ Thor paused. Mat could hear the words catch in his throat. “Thom’s dead, Master Gill. If he was your friend, I’m sorry. He was mine, too.”

“Dead. Dead, you say. How?”

“A... a man attacked us. Thom pushed this at me and told us to run.” Al’ Thor started to fold Thom’s cloak back up again. The patches fluttered in the wind like butterflies. “We’d be dead, both of us, except for Thom. The three of us were on our way to Caemlyn together. He told us to come here, to find The Queen’s Blessing.” Al’ Thor stood up. “That’s why we’re here, Master Gill.”

The innkeeper stood rubbing at the day or two of scruff on his chin. When he finally spoke, his words came a bit slowly, and had a softer edge. “I’ll believe Thom Merrill is dead when I see his corpse.” He cleared his throat roughly. “Nay, nay, I believe you saw what you saw; I just don’t believe he’s late of this world. He’s a harder man to kill than you might believe, is old Thom.”

Al’ Thor put a hand on Mat’s shoulder. “It’s alright, Mat. He’s a friend.”

Mat looked down and saw that his hand was under his coat, holding the hilt of his dagger. He hadn’t even realized he was reaching for it.

Master Gill sighed. “I suppose I am at that.”

Leaving the dagger where it was, Mat took his hand out slowly and put it on his quarterstaff. *Odd, that. Swear I had my staff in my right hand to begin with. And why would I reach for the dagger with my staff already in hand?* He tried to clear his head with a little shake, keeping a wary eye on Master Gill. Maybe the innkeeper had known the gleeman, but that didn't mean Mat had to trust him.

"Coming to Caemlyn," Gill said with a shake of his head. "This is the last place on earth I'd expect Thom to come, excepting maybe it was Tar Valon." He waited for a stableman to pass, leading a horse, then continued a bit more quietly. "You've trouble with the Aes Sedai, I take it."

"What makes you think that?" Matt asked sharply.

"Yes," al'Thor said at the same time.

Master Gill chuckled dryly. "I know the man, that's what. Hard to see him bringing you here less you were in trouble, and a trouble that Thom cared about. Lads your age, yeah, I could see him jumping in with you if your problems were with—" The laughter in his eyes flickered out. "Now... ah... I'm not making any accusations, mind, but I take it neither of you can... ah... that is, what— what exactly is the nature of your trouble with Tar Valon, if you don't mind my asking?"

Mat growled at the suggestion— the two of them mixed up with the One Power— but al'Thor piped up before Mat could take the innkeeper to task for it.

"No, no," al'Thor said, "nothing like that. I swear. We even had— there was an Aes Sedai helping us. Moiraine Sedai was—" He cut short, but the innkeeper's expression never changed.

"Glad to hear it. Not that I've all that much love for Aes Sedai, but better them than... that other thing." He shook his head slowly. "Too much talk of that kind of thing, with Logain being brought here. No offense meant, you understand, but I had to know, didn't I?"

“No, no offense,” al’ Thor said. Mat said nothing, but he had two hands on his staff now.

“You two look the right sort, and I do believe you were— are— friends of Thom, but it’s hard times and stony days. I don’t suppose you can pay? No, I didn’t think so. There’s not enough of anything, and what there is costs the sky and earth, so I’ll give you beds— not the best, but warm and dry— and something to eat, and I cannot promise more, however much I’d like.”

“Thank you,” al’ Thor said with a quizzical glance at Mat. “It’s more than I expected.”

It was more than Mat expected, too. They were the right sort of what? Why would he promise more, even if he could? What were they to him?

“Well, Thom’s a good friend. An old friend. Hotheaded and liable to say the worst possible thing to the one person he shouldn’t, but a good friend all the same. If he doesn’t show up, well, we’ll figure something out then. Best you don’t talk any more talk about Aes Sedai helping you. I’m a good Queen’s man, but there are too many in Caemlyn right now who’d take it wrong, and I don’t mean just the Whitecloaks.”

“Whitecloaks?” Mat and al’ Thor asked at the same time.

“Aye, they’re about. They can’t stand the Queen, because the Queen supports Elaida Sedai. Which means the Queen’s Guard does, too. Whitecloaks and Queen’s Guard, in the same city but on opposite sides of a line. And I don’t need trouble from either one. Some Guards have forgotten themselves enough lately to be a little rough with folks they overhear speaking against Aes Sedai. Not on duty, but it’s happened, just the same. And I’m guessing you know how Whitecloaks treat anyone who defends Aes Sedai. I don’t need off-duty Guards breaking up my common room to teach you a lesson, and I don’t need Whitecloaks egging someone on to paint the Dragon’s Fang on my door, so if you want any help out of me, you just keep thoughts about Aes Sedai to yourself, good or bad.” He paused, then added, “Maybe it’s best you don’t mention Thom’s name, either, where

anyone but me can hear. Some of the Guards have long memories, and so does the Queen. No need taking chances.”

“The Queen?” al’Thor said.

“Why would the Queen give a dead rat about old Thom Merrilin?” asked Mat. The attentions of a Queen sounded exactly like the kind of high-profile nonsense they needed to avoid.

The innkeeper laughed. “So he didn’t tell you everything. Don’t know why he should. On the other hand, I don’t know why you shouldn’t know, either. Not like it’s a secret, exactly. Do you think every gleeman thinks as much of himself as Thom does? Well, come to think of it, I guess they do. Still, it always seemed to me Thom thought even more of himself than most. He wasn’t always a gleeman, you know, wandering from village to village, sleeping under a hedge as often as not. Time was, Thom Merrilin was Court Bard right here in Caemlyn, and known in every royal court from Tear to Maradon.”

They didn’t say anything for a moment. “Thom Merrilin?” Mat finally said.

Al’Thor nodded slowly. “I can see that,” he said. “Thom always had such a stately manner and such grand gestures.”

Master Gill nodded. “It was not long after Taringail Damodred died that the... the *trouble* about his nephew cropped up,” he said. “Some said Thom was, shall we say, closer to the Queen than was proper. But Morgase was a young widow, and Thom was in his prime, and the Queen can do as she wishes is how I look at it. Only she’s always had a temper, has our good Morgase, and he took off without a word when he learned what kind of trouble his nephew was in. The Queen didn’t much like that. Didn’t like him meddling in Aes Sedai matters, either. Can’t say I think it was right myself, nephew or no. Anyway, when he come back, he said some words, alright. Words you don’t say to a Queen. Or to any woman, really, with spirit like Morgase. Elaida was set against him because of his trying to mix in the business with his nephew, and between the Queen’s temper and

Elaida's hostility, Thom left Caemlyn half a step ahead of a trip to prison, if not the headsman's axe. As far as I know, the writ still stands."

"If it was a long time ago," al'Thor said, "maybe nobody remembers."

Master Gill shook his head. "Gareth Bryne is Captain-General of the Queen's Guards. He personally commanded the Guardsmen Morgase sent to bring Thom back in chains, and I misdoubt he'll ever forget returning empty-handed to find Thom had already been back to the Palace and left again. And the Queen never forgets *anything*. I never knew a woman who did. My, but Morgase was in a taking. I swear the whole city walked soft and whispered for a month. Plenty of other Guardsmen old enough to remember, too. No, best you keep Thom as close a secret as you keep that Aes Sedai of yours. Come, I'll get you something to eat. You look as if your bellies are gnawing at your backbones."

He led the way back through the kitchen. Al'Thor followed, and Mat brought up the rear. He still didn't trust the innkeeper, but the man wasn't wrong. Mat was famished.

The Children and the Hand

The massive, seemingly flat stone was actually made of four weathered columns, joined together and rising out of the hillside. It towered over Perrin, Egwene, and Bela like a huge lean-to, cloaking the slope beneath in darkness. One of the columns rose above the rest, and the others seemed to form irregular steps down from that peak— a step on the right and two on the left. Perrin knew the shape— fingers. They were sheltering in Artur Hawkwing's hand. *Maybe some of his justice is left here. I hope.*

Back toward the pool, the Whitecloaks' shouts went on and on. They had seen Wind, but he had disappeared back into the darkness. Now small knots of torches moved in the distance— flickering points of light in the deep purple of the night. Perrin tried to count the riders, but there were too many, and it was too dark to see anyone not carrying a torch.

"I can't get a good tally," he said. "I see at least a few score, but I think there are a lot more."

Egwene pushed her head forward and peered up the hill. "How can you see anything at all?" she asked.

Perrin opened his mouth, then shut it. He licked his lips as he looked around and really paid attention to what he was seeing. The sun was down— all the way down, now— and clouds hid the full moon, but it still seemed like the fringes of twilight to him. *How **can** I see anything at all?* "They won't be able to pick us out in these shadows even if they come this far," he said. "We'll be alright."

The shouts died down for a second, and the night felt big and empty in the silence. Egwene took Perrin's hand and squeezed. They locked eyes for a moment, then each nodded and turned back to the newcomers.

He could see now that men were riding in bunches of ten or twelve, but he still couldn't tell how many groups there were. Only three or four were ever in sight at once as they wove through the hills. The shouting continued pretty steadily, and sometimes there were screams in the night— the screams of horses and the screams of men.

Perrin saw it all from more than one vantage. He crouched under Hawkwing's hand with Egwene, watching the torches move through the darkness like fireflies. But in his mind he also ran with Dapple and Wind and Hopper. The wolves couldn't escape; the run-in with the ravens had left them too hurt to run far or fast. Instead they meant to drive the men out of the darkness, drive them to the shelter of their fires. Men always sought the safety of their fires in the end. And horses were always quick to panic. Some of the mounted men led strings of horses without riders; they reared with wide, rolling eyes when the wolves darted among them, screaming and pulling till they broke free from the men who held their lead ropes. Mounted horses screamed, too, when grey shadows flashed out of the dark. Sometimes their riders did the same, just before jaws tore out their throats and stained red the white cloaks Perrin had first seen in the wolves' urgent sending not half an hour earlier. Elyas was out there, also, more dimly sensed, stalking the night with his long knife, a two-legged wolf with one sharp, steel tooth.

Still, the searchers refused to give up. After a few minutes, Perrin realized that the Whitecloaks were following a pattern. Each time some of the parties came in view, one of them, at least, was closer to the hillside where he and Egwene were hiding. *Should we run, or trust the darkness to keep us hidden?* Before he could talk it over with Egwene, a dozen bunched torches came around the base of the hill, bouncing with the trot of the horses. Perrin froze and held his breath. His hands tightened on the haft of his axe when he saw their lances gleaming in the torchlight.

The horsemen rode right past them, but then one of the men shouted, and the torches swung back. Perrin thought desperately but could see no way to go. As soon as they moved they would be seen, if they had not been already, and once they were marked they would have no chance, not even with the darkness to help.

The Whitecloaks drew up at the foot of the hill. They held their torches high and leaned forward in their saddles, peering up at the deep shadows under Artur Hawkwing's fingers.

"There *is* something up there," one of them said a touch too loudly. *He's afraid of what lies outside the light of his torch.* "I told you a body could hide in that there. Ain't that a horse?"

One of the Whitecloaks stepped his horse forward and shouted up the hill. "If you can understand human speech, come down and surrender. You'll not be harmed if you walk in the Light. If you don't surrender, you will all be killed. You have one minute." The lances lowered, long steel heads gleaming in the torchlight.

"Perrin," Egwene whispered, "we can't outrun them. If we don't give up, they'll kill us."

She laid a hand on Perrin's arm; her eyes were big in the dark. The horses below shifted their feet nervously. *If we run now, they'll chase us down.* Elyas and the wolves were still free, still hunted. Perhaps if they could just stall for time, Elyas would have them free before too long. As if to drive the point home, a Whitecloak who had hunted Dapple too closely screamed in the distance, then stopped screaming. *If we run...* He shook his head wearily and stood, then started down the hill. He heard Egwene sigh and follow him, her feet dragging behind her.

"Drop that axe," the leader barked.

Perrin stumbled toward him like a man in a trance.

"Drop it, whoreson!" The leader's lance shifted toward Perrin's chest.

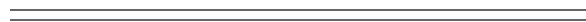
For a moment he stared at the lancehead, enough sharp steel to go completely through him. But when he shouted, “No!” it was not at the horseman.

Hopper came bounding out of the night, and Perrin was one with the wolf. Hopper, the cub who had watched the eagles soar, wanting so desperately to fly as they did, who hopped and jumped and leapt until he could get higher than any other wolf, always chasing the eagles. Hopper came bounding out of the night. The Whitecloaks didn’t even have enough time to start cursing before he took the throat of the man with his lance leveled at Perrin. The wolf’s momentum carried them both off the other side of the horse. Perrin felt the throat crushing, tasted the blood bursting into his mouth.

It tasted good.

Hopper landed lightly, already apart from the man he had killed. Blood matted his fur— some his, some not. A gash down his face crossed the empty socket where his left eye had been. His good eye locked on Perrin for just an instant. *Run, brother!* He turned to leap again, to soar one last time, and a lance pinned him to the earth. A second length of steel thrust through his ribs and drove into the ground beneath him. Kicking, he snapped vainly at the shafts that held him. *To soar.*

Pain filled Perrin, and he screamed, a wordless scream that had something of a wolf’s cry in it. Still screaming, he sprang forward. All thought was gone. The horsemen had bunched too closely to make good use of their lances, and the axe was a feather in Perrin’s hands, one huge wolf’s tooth, fashioned of steel and sharpened by stone. Something crashed into his head, and as he fell, he didn’t know if it was Hopper or himself who died.



“Get him up, already,” the tall one said.

The fat one lifted the bucket of horse piss and dunked Perrin's head in again, this time holding him under until he choked and coughed. When the fat one lifted his head back out of the bucket, the tall one slapped Perrin in the stomach. Hard. Egwene fought the urge to look away. *If you don't see it, who will witness? You leave him all alone when you close your eyes.* She stayed focused on Perrin, determined to watch what the Whitecloaks were doing to him.

He was stripped naked. His hands were tied together, raised high above his head, and fastened to a crossbar set up in the middle of the large square tent they were in. His feet were tied together, too, though not so tightly that he couldn't stand, and each foot was anchored to one of the posts that supported the crossbar. Altogether, the set up allowed Perrin to either hang till his shoulders popped, or stand straight with his arms extended almost completely upward. Standing there, they doused him again and again with water, letting the cold of the night work its way through him. Again and again they slapped him in the belly; again and again they lashed him across the back. They'd been at it for hours, and she could see that Perrin was exhausted. He kept switching from standing to hanging and back again, just trying to bear it, but his shoulders and legs were both too tired to support his weight. Every now and then he would just pass out, whether from pain, or fatigue, or both. And every time he did they dunked his head in horse piss till he choked and came to.

Egwene had lost count of how many times he'd gone under and come back. At first she had cried and screamed and howled at them to stop, but they had paid her no more mind than the ground cloth that served as the tent floor. Now she watched quietly, hands and feet bound together and connected by a six-inch length of rope, and every time the Whitecloak's hand smacked against Perrin's stomach, every time the whip cracked against his back, Egwene whispered a promise to herself that they would pay.

The tent flap shifted aside, and a short, slender, grey-haired man stepped inside. Egwene got a glimpse of night outside— campfires all about, and two white-cloaked guards at the entrance of the tent— before the flap fell

back into place. The tall one and the fat one both stood tall with a snap, waiting for this new man to speak.

“Enough,” he said, looking at the tall one. The newcomer had the face of a grandfather, or an indulgent uncle. Egwene would have thought it a kindly face but for the white-and-gold tabard he wore over burnished armor and a pure-white undercoat. “You’ve had your turn, as is your right, Questioner. Has it yielded anything? What has the boy told you?”

“My Lord Captain,” the tall one said. His voice had no emotion to it. Egwene thought it fit his long, gaunt face, with eyes set so deep they seemed almost to look out from caves. He appeared to have no fat at all; his skin was pulled tight over the muscle and bone beneath. “He says his name is Perrin, that he is traveling to Caemlyn. He says he knows nothing of wolves, and that he swung this axe only in self-defense.” He picked up Perrin’s great axe and twirled it in his hands.

“Yes,” said the Lord Captain. “And the girl? Has watching you work inspired her to reveal anything?”

“She cries that they are not darkfriends, that they have done nothing wrong, that they walk in the Light. She has given no name, but the boy calls her Egwene. She has seen a glimpse of how we ask questions. I believe she understands the gravity of her circumstance.”

“Indeed,” the Lord Captain said. “Let’s get him cleaned up, shall we? Let’s have an actual conversation.” He nodded to the fat one, who took to Perrin’s face with wet rag, then wiped him down— except for his back— and untied him from the crossbar. The Lord Captain nodded at Egwene, and the fat one picked her up roughly and sat her next to Perrin.

“Hello,” the Lord Captain said, pulling a chair and a small table from the edge of the tent and sitting down. “My name is Geofram Bornhald, Lord Captain of the Children of the Light and commander of this Legion. I apologize for the manner of Child Panet’s... interview. He belongs to the Hand of the Light, and their methods are not my methods. But when the Hand is present, it is entitled to the first interview of any captives.” He

looked at the tall one. “But that is over now, yes Child Panet? I believe we may now have our own conversation.”

Egwene did not trust this new man, but she was glad for a respite from Child Panet, for Perrin if not for her. Up close she could see the welts on his front and the wounds on his back, and the dazed look that seemed locked in his eyes.

The Lord Captain pulled out two pouches and emptied them into two piles on the table. He fingered through each with a frown. One was the stuff from Egwene’s pockets, and the other must have been the stuff from Perrin’s. Her own pile was meager— a few odds and ends, a small belt knife, the beads they had taken from around her neck. Perrin’s was not much different. His belt knife was larger, and he had that wolf’s head he had carved a few weeks back. Egwene had forgotten about the carving, and wondered if Perrin had known even then about his... Talent. His pile also had a couple of coppers, and one large silver coin. *Where did he get silver?* It was this silver coin that Lord Captain Bornhald seemed most interested in. He pursed his lips and picked it up; it gleamed in the light of the four oil lamps sitting atop tall stands, one in each corner of the tent. He put it back on the table and pushed it around in a little circle with his middle finger. He stopped and brought his eyes back to the two of them.

“Not ten minutes ago,” the man said, “Child Jaret Byar visited me in my tent and shared his tally of the cost of tonight’s... encounter. What do you suppose he told me, Perrin? Egwene?” He paused and picked up the wolf carving. “Nine Children dead. Twenty-three injured, seven seriously. Thirty horses were hamstrung and had to be put down. Many of our remounts are scattered, and with the wolves to drive them, we may never see the greater part of those again. We cannot take days to gather them again. We must be in Caemlyn in time.”

The Lord Captain never raised his voice. He spoke quite mildly, in fact. He didn’t seem angry or hateful, and even smiled softly at them as he put Perrin’s carving back on the table. He looked at Perrin for a moment, then Egwene, and then turned to Child Panet.

“I asked Child Byar what *our* achievements were this night. What levy we exacted for the lives of nine Children— aside from these two younglings, of course. Do you know what he told me?” The Lord Captain paused, but Child Panet said nothing. “He estimates the pack that attacked us at fifty beasts or more, of which we slew twenty, perhaps as many as thirty. Besides these two, there were at least a dozen other men. He says we disposed of four or five, but despairs of finding any bodies, given darkfriends’ propensity for carrying away their dead to hide their losses.”

The Lord Captain laughed then, a rich, wry chuckle, and shook his head slowly. “Upward of fifty wolves and better than half a score of darkfriends. Well, he is still green. Perhaps when he has seen a few more actions.” He tapped his finger against his lips as he considered Perrin and Egwene. “No, I would say six or eight wolves, and perhaps no humans other than you two. It is a different thing, bringing the Light in country where streets and houses are far distant. Wolves have a way of seeming more than they are, in the night— and men, also. Yes, six or eight at most, I think. And we will see in the morning whether any fell besides the one that was with these two.”

At that Perrin grunted at tried to sit up, but it ended up as more of a flop. The Lord Captain only arched an eyebrow. “And what do you make of that?” he asked Child Panet, nodding at the axe in his hands.

Panet hefted Perrin’s axe with a grunt, then whirled it in a tight arc above his head that barely missed the top of the tent. *He looks as though he was born with an axe in his hands.* “Excellently balanced, my Lord Captain. Plainly made, but by a very good weaponsmith, perhaps even a master.” He looked at Perrin. “Not a villager’s weapon. Nor a farmer’s.”

“No, I would guess not.” He turned back to Perrin then. “Not a villager. Not a farmer. What are you then? Child Panet here tells me you are a darkfriend.”

Perrin heaved himself up to his knees at that. “We ain’t no darkfriends,” he said with a snarl.

The words were still half in Perrin's mouth when Child Panet reached him, jabbing the handle of the axe at his head. Perrin tried to duck, but the thick haft caught him over the ear. He went down hard. Blood ran down his cheek.

"You have no right—" Egwene began, then screamed as the axe handle whipped toward her. She threw herself aside, and the blow whistled through empty air as she tumbled to the ground cloth.

"You will keep a civil tongue," Panet said, "or you will have no tongue to keep." His voice still had no heat to it. Cutting out their tongues would give him neither pleasure nor regret; it was just something he would do.

"Go easy, Child." Bornhald looked at the captives again. "I expect you do not know much about the Anointed, or about Lords Captain of the Children of the Light, do you? No, I thought not. Well, for Child Panet's sake, at least, try not to argue or shout, yes? I want no more than that you should walk in the Light, and letting anger get the better of you won't help any of us."

Egwene looked up at the gaunt-faced man standing over them. *For Child Panet's sake?* She noticed that the Lord Captain did not tell Panet to leave them alone.

He picked up the carving again. "Not a villager, and not a farmer. You know, I have heard of this thing before, men running with wolves, though I have never seen it myself. Men supposedly talking with wolves, and with other creatures of the Dark One. A filthy business, enough to make one think that the Last Battle is indeed nigh."

"Wolves ain't—" Perrin started, but he cut off as Child Panet's boot drew back. Taking a deep breath, he went on in a milder tone. Panet lowered his foot. "Wolves aren't creatures of the Dark One. They hate the Dark One. At least, they hate trollocs, and fades."

The Lord Captain raised an eyebrow. "Who told you that?"

“A warder,” Egwene said. Child Panet turned his eyes to her. *His voice may be cool, but his eyes are all fire.* She sat straighter and looked back with as much defiance as she could muster. “He said wolves hate trollocs, and trollocs fear wolves.” That much was true, and she thought it best not to mention Elyas.

Bornhald shook his head sadly. “I give you every chance, but you only dig yourself deeper with every word.” He held up one finger. “You run with wolves, creatures of the Dark One.” A second finger. “You say you know nothing about wolves, but you, boy, carry a wolf talisman on your person. And now you say you know how wolves feel about trollocs, and trollocs about wolves.” A third finger. “You carry a Tar Valon mark in your pocket. Most men outside Tar Valon get rid of those as fast as they can. Unless they serve the witches.” A fourth. “You carry a fighting man’s weapon but dress like a farm boy. A skulker, then.” The thumb rose. “You admit to being acquainted with a warder, another creature of the Dark One. And I doubt he would have told you what he did if it were only in passing. Where did you meet him? In Tar Valon? Or perhaps in the Borderlands, running with myrddraal and trollocs? And wolves, no doubt? If so, tell me where. I have traveled a good deal in the Borderlands; I know them well.” He paused, but didn’t look like he expected any answer. Egwene offered none. “No? Ah, well, then.” He looked at his spread hand, then dropped it hard on the table. “Why don’t you tell me the truth of how you came to be running in the night with wolves?”

Egwene opened her mouth, but Perrin spoke before she could. “We’re from the Two Rivers,” he said quickly. She had planned to tell one of the stories they had worked out, but Perrin pressed on with the truth—or a version of it. The two of them had left the Two Rivers to see Caemlyn. On the way they had heard of the ruins of a great city, but when they found Shadar Logoth, there were trollocs there. They managed to escape across the River Arinelle, but by that time they were completely lost. Then they fell in with a man who offered to guide them to Caemlyn. He had said his name was none of their business, and he hardly seemed friendly, but they needed a guide. The first either of them had seen of wolves had been after the Children of

the Light appeared. All they had been trying to do was hide so they would not get eaten by wolves or killed by the men on horses.

“If we’d known you were Children of the Light,” he finished, “we’d have begged your help, for true.”

Panet snorted, but Egwene thought it remarkably believable. She turned to the Lord Captain; if he was convinced, Panet would fall in line.

“There is no warder in that,” the grey-haired man said after a moment.

“We— we met him in Baerlon,” Egwene said quickly. “The city was crowded with men down from the mines after the winter, and— and we were put at the same table, in an inn. We only talked to him for the length of a meal, no more.”

The Lord Captain stood. “Give them back their belongings, Child Panet. Not the weapons, of course, nor the talisman.”

“Are— are you letting us go?” Egwene asked. Perrin lifted his eyes to the Lord Captain to hear the answer. *He looks like his head weighs three stone.*

“Of course not, child,” Bornhald said sadly. “You may be telling the truth about being from the Two Rivers, since you know about Baerlon, and the mines. But Shadar Logoth? Very few know that name, most of them darkfriends. And anyone who knows enough to know the name knows enough not to go there. I suggest you think of a better story on the journey to Amador. You will have time, since we must pause in Caemlyn. Preferably the truth, child. There is freedom in truth and the Light.”

“My Lord Captain,” Child Panet said, his voice still cool, “this cannot be done. As you yourself say, we must reach Caemlyn in time, and with most of our remounts gone, we will be hard pressed enough without carrying prisoners along.”

“And what would you suggest?” Bornhald asked calmly.

“The penalty for darkfriends is death.” His flat voice gave Egwene a chill. *He would think no more of killing us than of squashing an ant.* “There is no truce with the Shadow. There is no mercy for darkfriends. Give me the rest of the night, and I will get you a confession.”

The Lord Captain nodded. “Zeal is to be applauded, Child Panet, but, as I must often tell my son, overzealousness can be a grievous fault. Remember that the Tenets also say, ‘No man is so lost that he cannot be brought to the Light.’ These two are young, too young to be deep in the Shadow. They can yet be led to the Light, if they will only allow the Shadow to be lifted from their eyes. We must give them that chance.”

For a moment, the grey-haired man really did seem a grandfather. When he turned his attention to Egwene, it was with the look of a man who regretted what he must do, but who had no intention of ever doing otherwise. *Is discipline not the duty of a grandparent? Can't have the child getting spoiled, can we?*

“If you refuse to come to the Light by the time we reach Amador,” he said to her, “I will be forced to turn you over to the Questioners for formal interrogation. And beside that, what you’ve seen here tonight is but a candle beside the sun. Repent, renounce the Dark One, come to the Light, confess your sins, tell what you know of this vileness with wolves, and you will be spared that. You will walk free, in the Light.” When he set his eyes on Perrin, he sighed sadly. A chill went down Egwene’s back. “But you, Perrin from the Two Rivers. You killed two of the Children.” He ran a finger along the blade of the axe that Child Panet still held. “For you, I fear, a gibbet waits in Amador.”

A Stranger in the Library

The food was rather meager— a few thin slices of gravy-covered beef, a spoonful of mustard greens, and two small potatoes— but Rand hardly noticed as he started shoveling it in his mouth. Not enough of anything, the innkeeper had said. Rand didn't want to think about how it would be when there was nothing at all.

“Now, why don't you tell me about this trouble of yours?” Master Gill said. “If I'm going to help, I'd best know what I'm getting into.”

Rand looked at Mat for some clue as to what he thought they should say, but he was too busy eating to look up. Rand scanned the room quickly—their table was in the corner, well away from anyone else, and no one could get close enough to overhear without them seeing. He took a deep breath. “I don't really understand it myself,” he began.

He kept the story simple. He didn't want to understate the danger, but he also didn't want to appear crazy with tales of trollocs and fades. Instead he told Master Gill that some men were after him and Mat and a couple of their friends. Rand didn't know why. He just knew these men chased them from their village and kept appearing where they were least expected. And they were set on killing him and his friends, or worse. Moiraine Sedai said some of them were darkfriends. Thom stayed on with them because he didn't trust Aes Sedai in general or her in particular, and didn't want to see them caught up like his nephew. Their group was separated during one attack while trying to reach Whitebridge, and then, in Whitebridge, Thom died saving them from another. Rand knew the story had some holes, but it

was the best he could do on short notice, trying not to tell more than was safe.

“We just kept on till we reached Caemlyn,” he said. “That was the plan, and we thought it best to, you know, stay with the plan. Caemlyn, and then Tar Valon.” He shifted in his chair, unable to get comfortable. Even leaving so much out, it felt wrong to be saying as much as he was. *Lan would surely disapprove*. “If we stay on that route, the others will be able to find us, sooner or later.”

“If they’re alive,” Mat said, eyes still down as he ate.

Rand stayed focused on Master Gill. “It— it could bring you trouble. Helping us, I mean.”

The innkeeper waved the warning off. “Can’t say as I want trouble, but it wouldn’t be the first I’ve seen. No bloody darkfriend will make me turn my back on Thom’s friends. This, eh, friend of yours from up north, now— if she comes to Caemlyn, I’ll hear. There are people what keep their eyes on comings and goings like that round here, and word spreads.”

Rand hesitated, then asked, “What about— I think her name is Elaida?”

The innkeeper thought for a moment, then finally shook his head. “No, I don’t think so. Maybe if you weren’t connected Thom. But she’d winkle it out, and then where would you be? No telling. Maybe in a cell. Maybe worse. They say she can *feel* things— what’s happened, like, or what’s going to happen. They say she can cut right through to what a man wants to hide. I don’t know, but I wouldn’t risk it. Nor the Guards neither. Ordinarily, they would take care of any darkfriends quick enough. But even if you could keep Thom quiet from the Guards, word would reach Elaida as soon as you mentioned darkfriends, and then you’re back where we started.”

“Aye, no Guards,” Rand said. Mat nodded vigorously while stuffing a fork into his mouth and got gravy on his chin.

“Trouble is, you’re caught up in the fringes of politics, lad, even if it’s none of your doing. And politics is a foggy mire full of snakes.”

“What about—” Rand started, but the innkeeper grimaced and stood up without warning. Rand turned to look at what had grabbed Master Gill’s attention. The cook was standing in the doorway to the kitchen, motioning at the innkeeper to come. As soon as their eyes met, she vanished back into the kitchen.

“Might as well be married,” Master Gill said. “Finds things that need fixing before I know as anything’s wrong. If it’s not the drains stopped up, or the downspouts clogged, it’s rats.” He put up his hands and shook his head. “Now, I keep a clean place, you understand. But the city is fit to burst right now, and with so many people, there’s rats everywhere. It’s like a plague. Anyway, best see what she wants. Your room is in the attic. Any of the girls can show you to it. And don’t worry none about darkfriends. I can’t say much good about the Whitecloaks, but between them and the Guards, that sort won’t dare show their faces in Caemlyn.” He sighed and started toward the kitchen. “I hope it isn’t the drains again.”

Rand went back to his food. Mat had slipped into that silent, distant mood that had taken him more and more over the past few days. He wasn’t even eating. He just stared at his plate, pushing a piece of potato in a circle with his fork.

“I thought you were hungry,” Rand said. “You have to eat. We need to keep up our strength if we’re going to reach Tar Valon.”

Mat let out a low, bitter laugh. “Tar Valon! All this time it’s been Caemlyn. ‘Moiraine will be waiting for us in Caemlyn. We’ll find Perrin and Egwene in Caemlyn. Everything will be alright if we only get to Caemlyn.’ Well, here we are, and ain’t nothing right. No Moiraine, no Perrin, no anyone. Now it’s, ‘Everything will be alright if we only get to Tar Valon.’ Ha!”

“We’re alive,” Rand said, more sharply than he had intended. He took a deep breath and tried to still himself. *The flame and the void*. “We’re alive,

and that bit is alright by me. And I mean to stay alive. I mean to find out why we're so important."

"All these people, and any of them could be darkfriends. Even Master Gill. He was awful quick to promise us help. What kind of man just shrugs off Aes Sedai and darkfriends? Ain't natural. Any decent person would tell us to get out, or... or... or something."

"Eat," Rand said gently, and watched until Mat started eating again.

Satisfied that Mat's growing fear and mistrust were not going to drive him to starve himself, Rand started eating his own meal by rote. Like Mat, he was afraid. Not of Master Gill. That was silly. No, Rand was afraid because he knew that no tall city walls or dedicated Queen's Guard was going to stop a fade from getting into Caemlyn if it wanted to. *Should I warn Master Gill about the fades, or should I try not to scare him?* Rand didn't know what to do, or what he would want Master Gill to do if their positions were reversed.

When they were finished, one of the serving maids showed them up to their room. The room had two beds, one on either side of the dormer window that let the cold morning sun in. The serving girl was dark eyed and pretty, and kept making eyes at Mat, but he didn't seem to notice. He just pulled the scarf down lower over his eyes and flopped down on one of the beds, not even taking off his cloak or boots. When she left with a little pout on her lips, Mat moved his arm and Rand realized that he'd had it inside his coat the whole time. *Clutching that bloody dagger, I'll lay oath.* Rand didn't know what to do about the suspicion that seemed to be taking over Mat's mind. It wasn't as if he had a long and rich history of friendship to guide him. Until Winternight, he and Mat were nigh strangers.

"You just going to lie up here hiding?" he said finally.

"I'm tired," Mat said, his voice muffled by his cloak.

"Come now, we need to talk to Master Gill some more. He may even be able to tell us how to find Egwene, and Perrin. They could be in Caemlyn

already if they managed to hang onto their horses.”

“They’re dead,” Mat said to the wall.

Rand tried to think of something clever to say, something that would get Mat moving again, but he couldn’t. He closed the door behind him softly when he left, hoping Mat really would get some sleep.

There was no sign of Master Gill downstairs, and none of the staff seemed to know where he was. For a while Rand sat in the common room, but he found himself eyeing every patron who came in, agonizing over whether he was a darkfriend, or even a fade. Every stranger could be anyone— or anything— especially in the initial moment when he was nothing but a silhouette in the doorway.

At one point, a Guardsman entering from the street stopped just inside the door and ran a cool eye over the room. It made a sort of sense— there were plenty of people from out of town at the inn. Still, Rand couldn’t shake the feeling that he was here looking for Rand and Mat. When the Guardsman’s eyes came his way, he dropped his head and studied the tabletop. When he looked up again, the man was gone. Rand let out a breath.

The dark-eyed maid was passing with her arms full of towels. “They do that sometimes,” she said as she went by, her voice almost a whisper. “Just to see there’s no trouble. They look after good Queen’s folk, they do. Nothing for you to worry about.” She smiled.

Rand shook his head. Nothing to worry about. *Jumping at shadows. As if the Guardsman would come over and demand to know if I knew Thom Merrilin.* He was getting as bad as Mat. He scraped back his chair.

Another maid was checking the oil in the lamps along the wall.

“Is there another room where I could sit?” he asked her. He did not want to go back upstairs and shut himself up with Mat’s sullen withdrawal. “Maybe a private dining room that’s not being used?”

“There’s the library.” She pointed to a door. “Through there, to your right, at the end of the hall. Might be empty, this hour.”

“Thank you. If you see Master Gill, would you tell him Rand al’ Thor needs to talk to him if he can spare a minute?”

“I’ll tell him,” she said, then grinned. “Cook wants to talk to him, too.”

He’s probably hiding. Rand nodded and turned away, hoping the library would have a book he hadn’t read. That would be a nice way to spend some time.

When he opened the door at the end of the hall, he stopped and stared. The shelves must have held three or four hundred books, more than he had ever seen in one place before. More than all the books he had ever seen anywhere put together. Clothbound. Leatherbound with gilded spines. Only a few had wooden covers. Rand had never heard of most of them, but some he knew well, like *The Travels of Jain Farstrider* or *The Essays of Willim of Maneches*. Others, like *Voyages Among the Sea Folk*, he had heard of but never read. *Father has always wanted to read about the Sea Folk.*

Rand had developed a love for books early. When he was younger, he and Father would read together often. It was one of his clearest and happiest childhood memories. He had loved the feeling of going into a world of imagination with Father, discovering new people and places together, and eventually coming home together. He wasn’t sure when things had gotten so much more difficult between them, or why he was often angry with Father for no reason. He wondered what Mother would have said about it. For some reason he was sure she would have made it right.

Now, picturing Father turning this copy of *Voyages Among the Sea Folk* over in his hands with a smile, getting the feel of it before settling down before the fireplace with his pipe to read, Rand’s heart broke a little for home, so far away.

A throat cleared behind him. Someone else was in the room. Friend or foe? Had he not noticed someone when he came in, or had someone followed

him into the library? Rand turned slowly, placing his hand on the hilt of his sword, hoping he wouldn't have to draw it.

Rand was used to being taller than almost everyone he met. In fact, he hadn't had to look up to meet anyone's eyes in a couple of years. But when he turned he saw someone a little more than a head taller than he was. But that was perhaps the least striking thing about this stranger.

The nose was as broad as the face, so wide it was more snout than nose. The face seemed to be hairless from eyebrow to chin and ear to ear, but a coat of short hair covered the rest of the head and neck, along with a shaggy black mane. The pointed ears had tufts of hair on top like tassels, and the chin had longer hair that looked like a scraggly beard. Long eyebrows hung down to either side of the single strong ridge that formed a canopy above the eyes. The eyes themselves faced forward like anyone's, but they were a pale orange, like a color from sunset, and were the size of saucers. Short, three-pronged horns or antlers sat atop the head.

A short-sleeved shirt revealed long, powerful arms covered in hair, just like the head. At the end of the arms were strong hands with long fingers— five fingers and a thumb! — and a rough, fleshy padding on the palms and wrists. The elbows and shoulders looked odd, but Rand couldn't figure how. Below the torso was a pair of legs that looked a lot like the arms; the pant legs even looked like short sleeves. The feet were long like the hands, and seemed to have thumbs, too. The toes— or fingers?— were long but curled back much further than Rand could curl his fingers or toes, so that only the sole and the heel touched the floor. Behind the legs was what seemed to be another torso extending back to a second pair of legs. Long pants and sturdy leather boots kept Rand from seeing much about these rear limbs, but he saw more than enough to shock and stagger him.

Rand let out a yell before clapping his hands over his mouth, then hurriedly returning the right one to the hilt of his sword. His mind kept trying to make sense of what he was seeing. *Tall. Really tall. Six limbs. Covered in hair. Short antlers. Snout. It can't be.* He let his hand slip away from the sword.

“Ogier,” he said. His voice was almost a whisper, but in the silence of the library it seemed to fill the entire room.

“So, some of you do remember,” the stranger said, voice as deep as a drum. “Too few. It’s our own fault, I suppose. Not many of us have gone out among humans since *Machin Shin* took over the Ways. Six generations. For you, many more. The Ways were lost at the end of the War of the Hundred Years. Too long, too long. And so few to travel and see, it might as well have been none.”

Rand stood there for a minute working his mouth open and closed before he could get anything else out. “My name is Rand al’Thor,” he finally said. He extended a tentative hand toward the stranger.

The ogier’s hand swallowed Rand’s. “I am Loial, son of Arent, son of Halan,” he said with a short bow. “Your name sings in my ears, Rand al’Thor.”

That sounded like a ritual greeting. Rand returned the bow. “Your name sings in my ears, Loial, son of Arent, son of— of— of Halan.”

“You humans are very excitable,” Loial said in his bass rumble. “I had heard all the stories, and read the books, of course, but I didn’t realize. Even in a city as great as Caemlyn. My first day here children cried, and parents screamed, and a mob chased me all the way across the city with clubs and knives and torches, shouting ‘Monster! Monster!’”

I’m talking to an ogier. I’m in Caemlyn, talking to an ogier, waiting for an Aes Sedai. “Yes, well,” Rand said, trying to think of some way to explain those reactions without defending them, “I’m sure none of them had ever seen an ogier. And you are an imposing figure. Still, no excuse for— for— rudeness.”

Loial gave a grin that almost split his face in two. His teeth were white, and as broad as chisels. “No, I suppose not. Well, the whole scene was quite mad. I was on the verge of beginning to get a little upset. There’s no telling

what would have happened if a party of the Queen's Guards hadn't come along."

"A lucky thing," Rand said. "I'm sure they wouldn't have wanted to see you beginning to get a little upset." *What would that look like? Or a middling level of upset, once it was well and truly begun?*

"Well, even the Guardsmen seem almost as afraid of me as the others. So for four days I haven't been able to stick my nose outside this inn. Good Master Gill even asked me not to use the common room." His ears twitched. "Not that he hasn't been very hospitable, mind you. And he was right to ask. That first night— such screaming and shouting. Everyone trying to leave through the door at the same time. Someone could have been hurt."

"Uh, Loial," Rand said, "why *don't* ogier travel more? Where I come from, I don't know that anyone thinks you all are real. Or if you were, that you've long since disappeared. What happened at the end of the— Wait. The end of the War of the Hundred Years? And you say that was six generations ago? Loial, how old are you?" He knew it was rude as soon as he said it, but the words had flown free of his lips and there was no taking them back.

"Ninety years," the ogier said with a flare of his nostrils. "It's not *that* young. I'm just ten years removed from being able to address the Stump. Yes, some of the Elders thought I was much too young to go Outside alone. But then the Elders always worry about anyone of *any* age going Outside. It's not safe out here. You humans are so rash, so erratic." He blinked and gave a short bow. "Please forgive me. I shouldn't have said that. But... you do fight an awful lot."

"That's alright," Rand said. *Ninety years. Older than Cenn Buie, and still treated as a child.* He sat down in one of the high-backed chairs. Loial sat on his back legs, but his forelegs stayed straight and he didn't lose an inch. Sitting like that, he was still taller than anyone Rand knew. "At least they did let you go. The... Stump, I mean."

Loial looked at the floor, wrinkling his nose and rubbing at it with one long finger. "Well, as to that, now. They may not have done that, exactly. That is,

they may have. By which I mean to say that I left before they decided one way or the other. But once they told me I would not be allowed to speak on the matter, I just... well, I just left. The Elders always said I was too hotheaded, and I fear I've proven them right. I wonder if they have realized I'm gone yet? But I had to go."

"If you don't mind my asking," Rand said, "why? Why did you want so badly to see the outlands— that is, the Outside? If I'd had my way, I don't know that I'd have ever left home, myself."

"Oh, I suppose part of me has always wanted to go wandering. I grew up reading many stories of the Outside, both ogier accounts and your own human texts. It was always so romantic. I read every scrap I could find about traveling, about the Ways, about customs in human lands. I really was quite taken with the idea of it, of this human world. It's so fast. So dangerous. But I never seriously considered leaving the *stedding*. Outside was just a place for my imagination to conjure when it was idle. Daydreams, you see.

"That all changed about, oh, five years ago. I was in my mid-eighties and very caught up in my studies, of course— treesongs, you know— when a human man came to visit us in Stedding Shangtai. The things he said..." Loial trailed off and got a faraway look in his eyes. When he realized he had stopped talking, he blinked a few times and continued. "Yes, well, we became friends, and he just had the most marvelous stories about the Outside. I wanted to see for myself, to see the places ogier had been, to meet more humans with your fascinating, frenetic lives, and to see the groves. Oh, how I wanted to see the groves."

"What groves?" Rand asked.

"The groves, planted by the ogier to keep memories of the *stedding* fresh." A floorboard creaked as he shifted forward, gesturing with his hands. Rand saw now that Loial held a book, which looked tiny in his hand. "Only a few of the Great Trees, naturally, towering to the sky. Mostly they used the trees of the land and the place. You cannot make the land go against itself, you

see. Not for long, anyway. The land will rebel. You must shape the vision to the land, not the other way round. In every grove was planted every tree that would grow and thrive in that place, each balanced against the next, each placed to complement the others. For the best growing, of course, yes, but also so that the balance would sing in the eye and the heart. Ogier books speak of groves to make Elders weep and laugh at the same time, groves to remain green in memory forever. I have a Talent, you see, for Treesinging. The trees won't listen to very many anymore, so not many ogier learn the songs. But I have a scrap of that Talent, so Elder Arent insisted I learn. Yes, I very much wanted to see the groves for myself."

"But what about the cities?" Rand asked. Loial answered only with a puzzled look. "The cities. The cities the ogier built. Here, for instance. Caemlyn. Ogier built Caemlyn, didn't you? The stories say so."

"Working with stone..." He shrugged his massive shoulders. "That was just something learned in the years after the Breaking, during the Exile, when we were still trying to find the *stedding* again. It is a fine thing, I suppose, but not the *true* thing. Try as you will—and I have read that the ogier who built those cities truly did try—you cannot make stone live. A few still do work with stone, but only because you humans damage the buildings so often with your wars. There were a handful of ogier in... ah... Cairhien, it's called now. Some stoneworkers were there when I passed through. They were from another *stedding*, luckily, so they didn't know about me, but they were still suspicious that I was Outside alone so young. I suppose it's just as well I had no reason to linger there. In any case, you see, working with stone is just something that was thrust on us by the weaving of the Pattern. The groves, though, the groves came from the heart."

"I didn't know ogier believed in the Pattern."

"Of course. It is not something to believe or not believe. It just is. The Wheel of Time weaves the Pattern of the Ages, and lives are the threads it weaves. No one can tell how the thread of his own life will be woven into the Pattern, or how the thread of a people will be woven. The Pattern gave us the Breaking of the World, and the Exile, and stone, and the Longing,

and eventually it gave us back the *stedding* before we all died. Sometimes I think you humans are the way you are because your threads are so short. They must jump around in the weaving. Oh, I'm sorry. I know better. I should not be reminding you of how short your lives are. Please forgive me. The Elders would be ashamed of me."

Rand laughed and shook his head. "Not at all. I suppose it could be fun to live as long as you do, but maybe not. Cenn Buie is the oldest man I know, and I think he's a miserable son of a goat."

"Hmm," Loial said. "Well, perhaps you have very short lives, but you do so much with them, always jumping around, so rash and impulsive. And you have the whole world to do it in. We ogier are bound to our *stedding*."

"But you're Outside now."

"For a time, yes. But I must go back, eventually. This world is yours, Rand, for you and your kind. The *stedding* are for mine. There's too much hurly burly Outside. And so much is changed from what I read about."

Rand thought about Moiraine Sedai's story about the Two Rivers and Manetheren. "Well, I suppose things do change over the years. Some, anyway."

"Some? Half the cities I read about aren't even there any longer, and most of the rest are known by different names. I visited Al' cair' rahienallen, which they now call Cairhien. For all of the sunrise on their banners, they don't even remember that their city's proper name is Hill of the Golden Dawn. And the grove there. I doubt it has been tended since the Trolloc Wars. It's just another forest, now, where they cut firewood. The Great Trees are all gone, and no one remembers them. And here? Caemlyn is still Caemlyn, but they let the city grow right over the grove. We're not a quarter of a mile from the center of the grove—from where the center *should* be. Not a tree of it left. I've been to Tear and Illian, too. Different names, and no memories. Tear's grove is just pasture for their horses, and Illian's is the King's park, where he hunts his deer, and none are allowed inside without his permission. It has all changed, Rand al' Thor. I fear very much that I will

find the same everywhere I go. All the groves gone. All the memories lost. All the dreams dead.”

Rand thought of home. *No one knew the Two Rivers used to be a part of Manetheren. I have no idea where an old ogier grove might be.* But he also remembered the Emond’s Fielders cleaning up on Bel Tine, already rebuilding after the attack of Winternight.

“Don’t give up, Loial,” he said. “Keep searching. Keep believing. And if you don’t find what you’re looking for, then you build it. Rebuild it. But don’t give up. We’re either moving forward or we’re dead. And we’re not dead.”

Rand let out a big breath. He felt foolish being so bold as to offer advice to someone of ninety years, and half expected Loial to laugh at him. Instead, the ogier nodded gravely.

“Yes, that’s the way of your kind, isn’t it?” Loial’s voice changed then, as if he were quoting one of his books. “Till shade is gone, till water is gone, into the Shadow with teeth bared, screaming defiance with the last breath, to spit in Sightburner’s eye on the Last Day.”

Loial cocked his head expectantly, but Rand had no idea what he was supposed to say next. The silence stretched out over a minute, more, Loial waiting for... *something*, until Rand just had to break it.

“The... the Great Trees,” he said. “Are they like *Avendesora*?”

Loial stood up, and the floor groaned as his weight shifted. “You know better than that. You, of all people.”

“Me? How would I know?”

“Are you playing a joke on me? I don’t think I will ever understand the Aiel sense of humor.”

“Aiel? I’m—I’m from the Two Rivers! I’ve never even *seen* an Aielman.”

Loial shook his head, and his tufted ears drooped outward as he sat back down. “Hrmm. Everything is changed. Half of what I know is useless. I hope I did not offend you. I’m sure your Two Rivers is a very fine place, wherever it is.”

“Somebody—” Rand said. “Well, someone once told me they used to call it Manetheren, back a long time ago. I’d never heard it, but maybe you—”

Loial raised his head and his ears perked up. “Ah! Yes. Manetheren.” Then the tufts dropped again and a look of hurt and sympathy washed over his face. “Manetheren. Manetheren had a very fine grove. Your pain sings in my heart, Rand al’Thor. We could not come in time.”

The corners of Loial’s mouth and eyes were turned down as if he really were sharing Rand’s terrible loss. *Manetheren was destroyed two thousand years ago. Surely he doesn’t think I remember it? I only know what I do because an outlander told me.* Rand didn’t know what more to say about Manetheren. He felt half a fraud as it was.

“The Wheel turns,” Loial said at last, “and no one knows its turning. But you have come almost as far from your home as I have from mine. A very considerable distance, as things are now. When the Ways were free and open, of course— but that is long past. Tell me, what brings you so far? Is there something you want to see, too?”

Rand opened his mouth to say that they were here to see the false Dragon, but the words wouldn’t come. He didn’t want to lie to Loial. He seemed... *true*, as odd as that might seem for a stranger so unlike himself. Perhaps it was because Loial felt like a peer, for all that he was nearly six times Rand’s age. It had been a long time since he had been able to really talk to anyone about what was happening. Except for Mat, and Mat talked less and less these days, preferring to sit and steep in his fears and suspicions. So Rand told Loial about Winternight and Bel Tine. Not a vague story about darkfriends— the truth, from the fade on the Quarry Road to the draghkar chasing them across the Taren (though he said nothing about the dreams).

It was horrifying to watch himself do this, to reveal his and his friends' most precious secrets to a stranger. It was almost as if he were two people—one trying in vain to hold his tongue while the other felt only the relief at being able to finally tell it all. Caught in that push and pull, he stumbled and stuttered and jumped around in the story. Shadar Logoth and losing his friends in the night, not knowing if they were alive or dead. The fade in Whitebridge, and Thom dying so they could escape. The other fade in Baerlon. Darkfriends later—Howal Gode and the boy that Rand had punched. Mat's blindness and Rand's sickness. The halfman outside the Goose and Crown.

He talked about how strange it had been to travel with Mat, whom he hardly knew, and about how afraid he was for the others. When he was with Mat, he dared not admit any fear. Mat was sour enough for the both of them. But with Loial, he could confess his fears. He talked about Moiraine Sedai—how she was frightening and comforting and beautiful and unreal. He talked about Perrin's strength and steadiness and kindness. He talked about the Wisdom, her toughness and her temper, and how she would do anything—including join them on this mad journey that had already killed at least one of them—if she thought it was what her villagers needed. He talked about Lan's lessons, and how the warder made every danger feel smaller.

And he talked a lot about Egwene. He told Loial things he had never told anyone—about how she had first pulled him into an empty room at the Winespring Inn for a kiss and then ran away before he knew what had happened. About the time they had snuck away with the brandy. About how she had kept him sane and together on Bel Tine morning, and had told him how to save Father's life. And he told the ogier about how hard it had been, how much it had hurt that she wouldn't let anyone know that she liked him, or he her. How strained and strange it had been to be traveling with her, watching her become someone else, watching her leave Emond's Field behind—and seemingly Rand along with it. He heard Min's voice ringing in his memory. *She's not for you, nor you for her; at least, not in the way you both want.*

He didn't tell Loial about Elsa Grinwell, but he found himself thinking of her a great deal while he talked about Egwene. It wasn't so much that he wanted to go back to the Grinwells' farm, or spend more time with Elsa. But after Elsa's reckless affection, the dance he had been doing with Egwene, the dance of secrecy and control, felt less appealing.

What will it be like to see her again?

When he finally stopped talking, he was out of breath, panting in his chair, looking up at Loial. The ogier's face, so different from any Rand had ever seen, gave no clues as to what he was thinking or feeling. *Does he believe me? Maybe he thinks I'm going mad. Maybe—*

"*Ta'veren*," Loial said.

Rand blinked. "What?"

"*Ta'veren*." Loial scratched behind a pointed ear and gave a little shrug. Then he chuckled. "Elder Haman always said I never listened, but sometimes I did. Sometimes, I listened. You know how the Pattern is woven, of course?"

"I— I never really thought about it, I guess," he said slowly. "It just is."

"Hmmm, yes. Well, not exactly. You see, the Wheel of Time weaves the Pattern of the Ages, weaves it out of the threads our lives. It's not fixed, the Pattern, not always. If a man tries to change the direction of his life and the Pattern has room for it, the Wheel just weaves on and takes it in. There is always room for small changes. But sometimes the Pattern simply won't accept a big change, no matter how hard you try. You understand?"

Rand nodded. "I could move from the farm to Emond's Field, and that would be a small change. If I wanted to be a king, though..."

"Yes, that's it. We can make small changes, but most of us are more or less bound by the Pattern. But a few, a very few, bend the fabric of the pattern around *them*, changing the weave. These are *ta'veren*. I don't know why the

Wheel spins out *ta'veren*. Elder Haman thinks they are there to correct the weave when it begins to drift away from the Pattern. But *ta'veren*, see, the life-thread of a *ta'veren* swirls all the threads around it, and those force *other* threads, and those still others, and on and on. They used to call it *ta'maral'alien*— the Web of Destiny. Of course, even the *ta'veren* and the *ta'maral'alien* woven around them are bound by the Wheel and the Great Pattern. But *ta'veren* can produce major variations in the Pattern of an Age. Artur Hawkwing was *ta'veren*, you know. I suppose Lews Therin Kinslayer was, too, for that matter.” He let out a booming chuckle and relaxed his shoulders. “I say, Elder Haman would be proud of me. The books about traveling were much more interesting, but I did listen sometimes.”

“Um, okay,” Rand said slowly, “but you’ll find no Hawkings here. We’re just simple folk from sheep country, and all we want to change is for us to be home instead of here, or— or wherever the others are.”

“Well, now, I didn’t say *you* were *ta'veren*, did I? But I could almost feel the Pattern swirl just listening to you tell your tale, and I’ve no Talent there. So... yes, you are *ta'veren*. You, or maybe one of your friends.”

Rand laughed. “That’s impossible, Loial. You only say such things because you don’t know us.”

Loial sat silently, studying Rand while rubbing the bridge of his broad nose. “This,” he finally said, “has definitely been the most interesting stop on my travels so far. To meet a *ta'veren*, to talk to him. This has given me much to think about. Do you know how long you will stay here? It would be a privilege to spend some more time with you.”

“Stay?” Rand was stuck on Loial’s comments about the Pattern and *ta'veren*. He didn’t care at all for the idea that he or any of his friends— after all of this, they were friends now, weren’t they?— were caught up in some Web of Destiny. He only wished they could all just go home. “We’ll stay until Moiraine Sedai finds us. And if she doesn’t...” *If she doesn’t, she’s dead, and everyone else with her.* He gave himself a shake. Egwene

was not dead, Perrin was not dead— no one was dead. *Except Thom.*
“Moiraine Sedai will find us.”

Loial walked across the room— it was odd to see someone who in some ways seemed so human walking on four legs— and touched his shoulder. “I am sure your friends are well, Rand al’ Thor.”

Rand nodded.

“Rand, for however long you are here, I wonder— would you talk with me from time to time? Perhaps a game of stones here or there? I’ve had no one to talk to in days, save good Master Gill, and he is busy most of the time. And your story... it interests me. *Ta’veren.* I never would have guessed.”

“Of— of course. Of course I will, Loial.” Rand thought on Egwene and Perrin, the Wisdom, Lan, Moiraine Sedai. *We won’t be staying long, though. They’ll find us, and we’ll be away.* “We’ll talk. Whenever you like.”

Along the Picket Lines

In the days after they left Whitebridge, Nynaeve, Moiraine, and Lan encountered nothing out of the ordinary, nothing that would attract a person's notice or put her guard up. Village after village, farm after farm, family after family, the country east of Whitebridge was decidedly normal.

Nynaeve hated it.

This land seemed unrelated to the world as she now knew it— a place where trollocs could slaughter a village in a night and fades attacked Aes Sedai on the open roads. Here the men and women were as trusting and innocent as she had been just a few weeks earlier. Now, with the charred smell of Whitebridge still in her nose, seeing these normal people, these normal towns, gave Nynaeve a chill. She wanted to slap them, yell at them, cry while they held her. Instead she rode on, just behind Moiraine, and tried to still her face.

Moiraine kept them steady on the road, peering eastward as if she could see the whole length of the great highway, all the many miles to Caemlyn. As if she could see what waited there.

Nynaeve couldn't see it. She couldn't hear it on the wind. She couldn't fathom what Caemlyn might hold— a city to dwarf even Baerlon and Whitebridge, with the children lost somewhere inside. At least they would recover one child before they got there. If the Aes Sedai was to be believed. And after Whitebridge, well, Nynaeve reluctantly found herself believing Moiraine. More than she had before, at any rate. But even with her

assurances that she could find this first boy, Moiraine's newfound credibility did less to comfort Nynaeve than she would have hoped.

A few days after Whitebridge, in between villages and with not a farm in sight, Moiraine turned them sharply to the north, into the forest and toward the boy who still had his coin. Soon they lost sight of the road altogether, and they just trusted to the fix in the Aes Sedai's mind, the location she seemed to know as if a beam of white light shot from the coin in the boy's pocket straight up into the endless skies.

They made camp for the night in the shelter of three big oaks that had grown close together. They ate just a little dried meat and some leafy greens from the forest undergrowth that were unfamiliar to Nynaeve, but that Lan and Moiraine seemed to know well. The greens they ate raw. Lan was unwilling to risk a fire.

The warder's caution proved prudent. The next day, they came across the trail of a large group of people on horseback, moving northeast, seemingly headed almost exactly toward the boy with the coin. It made Nynaeve nervous to think of him, alone or maybe with the gleeman or Egwene, having to confront a large group of strange men. It didn't improve her mood when Lan found a tree where they had evidently been practicing their bowmanship. *Strangers, armed, and off the main road. This doesn't mean to end well.*

The sun set and they were picking their way through the forest in near full dark. Nynaeve had grown to trust Clover over the past few weeks, but she was still ill at ease when neither she nor the mare could see the way forward. Even in the failing light, though, she could make out Moiraine sitting up tall in her saddle and looking around in every direction before saying, almost in a whisper, "It is gone."

"It's— what is 'it'?" asked Nynaeve. "Do you mean one of the boys? That one of the boys is—?"

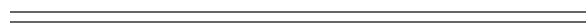
"No, no. He... did not die," Moiraine said slowly, sliding her leg over her saddle and climbing down to the ground. "But he no longer has the token.

As far as I can tell, he is still in the path of this mob. Let us hope they have not caught him. In the morning we will keep on as we have been going. When I get close enough, I can find him without the coin.”

They stopped for the night and set up camp. Lan guessed that they were still about a day behind the horsemen, so he consented to build a small fire, and Nynaeve made herself a chamomile and mint tea to help relax her nerves. Still, when she lay down her head, she did not expect a good night’s sleep. As the fire burned down to coals, Nynaeve watched Moiraine, sitting upright with her eyes closed. Her face was impassive in the firelight, but Nynaeve was sure she was awake.

Long after the last glow had faded from the coals, Moiraine opened her eyes and looked at Nynaeve. She could feel the Aes Sedai’s smile even in the dark. “He has regained the coin, Wisdom. All will be well.” She lay down on her blankets with a sigh and almost at once was breathing deep in slumber.

Eventually, Nynaeve drifted off, too, but her sleep was far from restful. Who was the boy who had lost his coin? How had he lost it? How did he get it back? And who were these horsemen trampling through the wood?



It wasn’t the cold or being alone that Nynaeve resented. It was the ignorance. She stood holding the reins to all three horses, peering into the night in a vain and token hope that she might see the Aes Sedai and warder, see where they were and what they were doing. But she couldn’t. They had left her there without a word of their plan, just a directive from Lan to keep the horses quiet.

She rubbed Clover’s nose. “Do I seem to you much like a stable boy?” she asked. “Not a very good one, I’m sure.”

That had begun to wear on Nynaeve— she was very good at being Wisdom to Emond’s Field, but those skills and talents had been rarely called on of late. These days, she just never felt like she was good at what she was doing. No, that was unfair. She could stalk a rabbit as well as anyone she knew. She was an adept trapper, and was surviving extended travel without real shelter better than most would. Still, though. Next to the Aes Sedai and warder, her abilities seemed rather pedestrian. *Unless you count healing Lan after...* But she refused to think about that. That wasn’t her. That was her accidental, loathsome “talent.” *Why did Moiraine have to tell me those things?*

“You are needed, Wisdom.”

Nynaeve near jumped out of her skin at the sound of Lan’s voice. She stifled the cry before it made it to her throat and threw her fist at his chest as she spun around. Of course, he caught her hand before she could punch him. Ordinarily turning to see someone who surprised her was enough to settle Nynaeve’s nerves, but she found it less comforting when Lan’s chameleon-like cloak made his head seem almost to hang suspended in the night. The hand that had caught her fist appeared to come out of thin air.

She drew a ragged breath, and he let go of her hand to hobble the horses. Once they were secured, he straightened, grabbed her hand again, and headed off into the night. With his cloak, his dark hair, and near complete silence even in the brittle woods of late winter, she could never have followed him without his grip as a guide. Not that she could have pulled loose if she tried. Lan’s strong hands swallowed hers.

As they came up on a small rise, too small to even be called a hill, he sank to one knee and pulled her down beside him. After a moment she realized that Moiraine was there, too. Unmoving, the Aes Sedai could have passed for a shadow in her dark cloak. Lan gestured down the hillside to a large clearing in the trees.

She saw pale blurs in regular rows. She couldn’t make out much detail, but it was enough to see that it was an encampment with scores of tents. But

were these people friends, keeping the Emond's Field boy safe, or something else?

"Whitecloaks," Lan whispered. "Two hundred, maybe more. There's good water down there. And the lad we're after."

"In the camp?"

Lan nodded. She didn't see it, but she felt it where their shoulders touched.

"He is in the middle of it," Moiraine said, pointing as if Nynaeve would have any way to see which tent she was singling out.

"I went close enough to see he's under guard," said Lan.

"A prisoner?" Nynaeve said. "Why?"

"A fair question," Moiraine said. "The Children should not be interested in a village boy, not unless there was something to make them suspicious."

"That takes precious little," Lan said, "as you well know, Aes Sedai. Still, it is worrisome."

"How are you going to free him?" Was she so sure he *could* march into the middle of two hundred men and come back with the boy? She sounded sure. *Well, he is a warder. Some of the stories must be true.*

"With your help," Lan said. "I did not lie when I said you were needed. I can bring him out easily enough, but he'll likely be in no shape for stealth. It will be hard to stay hidden, and if we're seen, we may find two hundred Whitecloaks on our heels, and us riding double. Our best chance is to leave them too busy to chase us—if you are willing to take a chance."

Finally. A chance to do something. "You know that I am. What kind of chance?"

"In the darkness beyond the tents sit their horse lines—hundreds of horses, their reins tied to long picket ropes strung between posts. If those ropes are

cut— not all the way through, but enough so they'll break if the horses should bolt— we can leave the Whitecloaks chasing their own mounts about when Moiraine Sedai creates a diversion. They will be too busy to come after us. Two men guard that side of the camp, but you are good in the woods. I doubt they'll ever see you."

She swallowed. Stalking rabbits was one thing; guards, though, with spears and swords... *Well, I guess he really does think I'm good.* She took a deep breath. "Very well. I'm in."

Lan nodded again. "One other thing. We have wolves about tonight. I saw two, and if I saw that many, there are probably more." He paused. "It was almost as if they wanted me to see them. Anyway, they shouldn't bother you. Wolves usually stay away from people."

"I wouldn't have known that," she said with a half-smile, "what with growing up in sheep country and all." He grunted as she nudged him with her shoulder, and she even saw the corner of his mouth curl ever so slightly.

"Now is better than later," he said, getting up and slipping away to the right. "Luck on you, Wisdom."

"Take care," Moiraine said softly. "Once you cut the ropes, return as quickly as you can. I would not risk you any more than any of the others. But it seems the whole world is at risk these days."

Nynaeve set her jaw, got up into a crouch, and crept around her to the left. When she got to a good place to kneel for a second, she eased her knife in its sheath and surveyed the camp full of armed men. *Two hundred men, with spears and swords.* A deep breath. *And one of the boys.* Quickly she tied her skirts up to give her legs freedom and hurried into the night.

Making her way through the dark woods was not hard in and of itself. The faint light of the waning moon was more than adequate, and the ground had a slow, easy roll. But it was not so easy with her heart racing and her hands tingling in a cold sweat. The trees, bare and stark against the night sky, constantly reminded her that this was no childhood game. The keening

wind sounded like an echo of the trolloc horns outside Shadar Logoth. And with a moment for her mind to conjure every danger, she remembered that wolves had *not* been running away from people in the Two Rivers this winter.

She felt a wave of relief when she finally caught the smell of horses. Almost holding her breath, she got down on her stomach and crawled upwind, toward the smell. And here were the guards marching toward her out of the night, white cloaks flapping in the wind and almost shining in the moonlight. Had they carried torches, they could scarcely have been easier to spot. She froze and tried to make herself a part of the ground. Not ten paces in front of her, the guards came to a sharp halt with a stomp of feet, facing each other, spears shouldered. Just beyond them she could make out shadows that had to be the horses. The smell of horse and manure was strong.

“All is well with the night,” one white-cloaked shape said. “The Light illumine us, and protect us from the Shadow.”

“All is well with the night,” said the other guard. “The Light illumine us, and protect us from the Shadow.”

With that they turned and marched off into the darkness again.

Crack guards, they are. Nynaeve waited, counting to herself while they made their circuit twice. Each time they took exactly the same count, and each time they rigidly repeated the same formula, not a word more or less. Neither so much as glanced to the side; they stared straight ahead as they marched up, then marched away. *They would miss me if I were standing up.*

Before their pale cloaks disappeared into the night a third time, she was already on her feet, running in a crouch toward the horses. She slowed as she approached. The guards might not see a woman under their noses in the dark, but they would certainly investigate if she startled the horses into sudden whinnies and neighs.

The horses along the lines— there looked to be as many as half a dozen rows— were just vague shapes in the darkness. Most had their heads down, and occasionally one snorted or stomped a foot in its sleep. She crept along the picket in the dim moonlight and was nearly past the end post before she saw it. She reached for the line, and froze when the nearest horse raised its head and looked at her. Its single lead-rein was tied in a big loop around the thumb-thick line that ended at the post. *One whinny.* Her heart tried to break free of her chest. Surely the guards would come to investigate the thunder it was making.

Never taking her eyes off the horse, she sliced at the picket rope, feeling in front of her blade to see how far she had cut. The horse tossed its head. *Just one whinny.* She tried to make herself breathe.

Only a few thin strands of hemp remained whole under her fingers. Slowly she crept toward the next line, watching the horse until she could no longer see if it was looking at her or not. She took a breath. *If they are all like that, I'll not last the night.*

At the next picket rope, though, the horses remained asleep, as they did at the following rope, and the one after that. They didn't notice when she came. They didn't notice when she left. They didn't even stir when she cut her thumb and bit off a yelp. Sucking the cut, she looked warily back the way she had come. She was upwind now, and could no longer hear the guards make their rote exchange. If they were in the right place, in just the right section of their patrol route, they might have heard her. And if they were coming to investigate the aborted yelp, the wind would keep her from hearing them until they were right on top of her. She had cut four ropes. Just one remained. Nynaeve shook her head. *Time to go. Four out of five horses running is more than enough to keep them busy.*

But she didn't move. She was imagining Lan's eyes when she told him why she had left an entire line of horses intact. He would not second guess her. Her reasoning was sound, and he would not expect any more of her. She was a Wisdom, not a bloody warder. *We can't all make ourselves invisible*

with a wave of our Tar Valon cloaks. She had done her share. She had done what was needed. *Time to go.*

Nynaeve rose into a crouch, but her feet didn't take her back toward where she had left Moiraine. They took her to the next picket. And the first horse on it was Bela.

She could not mistake that squat, shaggy shape. There was no way a Whitecloak was riding on such a stubby little horse. She was so glad that she had not left off this last line that she was shaking. Her arms and legs trembled so that she was afraid to touch the picket rope, but her mind was as clear as the Winespring Water. Whichever of the boys was in the camp, Egwene was fair certain to be there, too. And if they left riding double, some of them would be caught no matter how well the Children's horses were scattered. Some of them would die. To get away clean with *two* prisoners, they would need more horses.

She knelt down and took a few deep breaths with her chin against her chest. When she had herself calm enough to work her blade, she raised her head and slit the picket rope just as she had the others. She sheathed her dagger and untied Bela's rein from the picket. The shaggy mare woke with a start and tossed her head, but Nynaeve stroked her nose and spoke soft, comforting words in her ear. Bela gave a low snort and seemed content.

Other horses along Bela's line were awake, too, and looking at her. Afraid to spark any reaction that might draw notice, she reached hesitantly to the next lead rein, but the horse gave no objection to a stranger's hand. Rather the opposite. The strange horse came at Nynaeve with a nuzzling nose until she gave it some of the muzzle-stroking she had given Bela. She took a rein in each hand and watched the camp nervously. The pale tents were only thirty paces off, and she could see men moving among them. If one with a torch noticed the horses stirring and came to see what caused it, she'd be found for certain.

She looked back to where she had left Moiraine. *Curse you, woman, you've never waited for me before. Let's not start now.*

As if in answer, a jagged trident of pure white light stabbed the ground just beyond the horses, splashing dirt and rocks like a fountain, and for a moment the darkness was no more. Thunder struck her ears— no, her *body* — so hard that she thought her knees would buckle. The horses went mad, screaming and rearing. The picket ropes snapped like thread where she had cut them, and another lightning bolt sliced down before the image of the first faded.

Nynaeve would have exulted at the perfect working of their plan, but the horses wouldn't let her. At the first clash Bela jerked one way while the other horse reared in the opposite direction. Nynaeve thought the two might pull her arms clean out of their sockets. For an endless minute she hung suspended between the horses, her feet off the ground, her scream flattened by the second crash. Again the lightning struck, and again, and again, all in one continuous, raging roar. Confused and terrified, the horses balked and let her drop to the ground. She wanted to crouch on the ground and soothe her tortured shoulders, but she had no time. Somehow she lifted her arms and wrapped her fingers in Bela's mane, then pulled herself onto the heaving mare's back. The other rein was still around her wrist, pulled tight into the flesh.

A long, grey shadow tore past, seeming to ignore her and her horses even though its teeth snapped at every other crazed animal now flying about. A second shadow followed close behind. Nynaeve wanted to scream again, but nothing came out. *Wolves! What are they doing? What is **Moiraine** doing?*

She dug her heels into Bela, but she need not have done so. The mare ran, and the other horse was more than happy to follow. It probably would have followed anywhere, so long as they could *run*, so long as they could escape the sky fire that murdered the night.

Rescue

Even slowed by the loss of their remounts, the double line of horsemen moved steadily, and it took all of Perrin's strength and concentration to walk alongside them all day, day after day. Every step was crucial, every stone in his path potentially deadly. If he were to fall, hands bound together and held by a leash, he would be trampled underfoot unless his handler stopped, protected him, and helped him back up. And Perrin had trouble believing any of these Whitecloaks would do half of that for him, for all that Lord Captain Bornhald had ordered them to keep him and Egwene alive until they reached Amador. To the Whitecloaks, they were no more than darkfriends. Any death was too merciful.

So Perrin walked with his muscles tense, scanning the ground anxiously. Egwene did the same. Every now and then he snuck a glance at her, when she met his eyes, her face was tight and tired, but almost always smiling. He didn't know how she did it.

"Pick up the pace, darkfriend." The voice came from behind Perrin and to his right. He didn't even have to turn to know. *Byar*.

Child Jaret Byar was Lord Captain Bornhald's second. Perrin and Egwene had not met him until the day after their capture. They had spent most of that first night with Child Panet, but Panet was not allowed to "question" them anymore. The shortage of horses meant Perrin and Egwene had to go on foot—and, if they were to arrive in Caemlyn "in time," make it through days of hard marching. That meant no physical abuse from Child Panet. But Child Byar had made sure they didn't feel neglected in Panet's absence.

Where Panet had a cold, flat, almost disinterested dedication, Byar's zeal burned so hot that light seemed almost to warp around him. He couldn't touch them much beyond a few kicks and blows here and there, but he reveled in giving detailed explanations of what awaited them during formal Questioning in Amador. He savored the chance to talk about hot irons and pincers, about knives slicing away skin and needles piercing, about what could be done to finger- and toenails.

"Pick it up!" Byar said.

Perrin tried to summon the energy to go a little faster, but he couldn't. He looked at Egwene out of the corner of his eye, and saw that she *was* picking up the pace. Perrin took a deep breath, lowered his head a little, and quickened his feet. If Egwene could do it, so could he.

"Child Hanem. Child Minnear."

"Yes, Child Byar," said the Whitecloaks holding Perrin's and Egwene's leashes.

"Don't let them slow you down. Caemlyn is waiting. Drag them along if you have to." Byar leaned down in his saddle to talk to Perrin directly. "Don't think they won't, darkfriend. We drag you till your legs are rubbed down to stubs, the Questioners will still be able to get their answers."

Perrin finally turned to face Byar. As expected, the Whitecloak had Perrin's axe strapped to his saddlebag. He seemed to have appropriated it for his own. Perrin never saw him without it.

"Yes," Perrin said, "but it would be a shame if Child Hanem dragged me *under* his horse. Ain't sure I could survive that."

Byar smiled, reached his left arm toward the sky, then brought it down in a great slap against Perrin's back. The wounds from the lashes Child Panet had given him screamed in fire, and he almost lost his balance, but Perrin grit his teeth and didn't make a sound.

Child Byar barked a laugh. “Hyah!” he said, and rode toward the front of the double column.

Perrin regained his footing and returned his eyes to the ground. Every step was crucial, every stone in his path potentially deadly.

Each night it grew more difficult for Perrin to fall asleep. He was tired enough, walking all day, trying to keep pace with an entire cavalry. But come night, with his hands bound behind him in the cold, with no blankets and no shelter, he could not escape the images that Child Byar put in his head.

Tonight was the worst yet. However he shifted, he still had rocks in his back. With his hands bound behind him, he couldn’t clear a sleeping space. Even huddling with Egwene did little against the cold of the night; the very ground seemed to steal the warmth from his body. So he lay there, awake, staring up at the stars. Closing his eyes only made it easier to see Byar’s promises come to life.

He sat up just to do something, *anything*. Two guards’ cloaks gleamed greyly in the faint moonlight. He could not make out their faces, but he knew they were watching. *As if we could try anything, bound hand and foot.* Even in the dark, he could picture with absolute clarity the disgust in their eyes and the pinched looks on their faces, as though they had been set to guard deformed monsters soaked in the filth of a sick goat, monsters caught eating babies and poisoning wells. It was the look they had worn on their faces when taking their stations, the way all the Whitecloaks looked at them. It never changed. *These people will never believe, never admit, that we aren’t darkfriends.*

Egwene didn’t even stir at his movement. Her exhaustion seemed to trump any fear Byar had planted in her mind. That wasn’t really surprising. One

thing Perrin had learned about Egwene in the weeks since Winternight—fear had little sway over her. She did get tired, though. He wondered if either of them had enough left to make it to Caemlyn on foot.

A lantern moved toward them from the larger camp. It stopped at the guards, and Perrin heard a man's voice asking something, and the guards answering respectfully. Perrin could not hear what was said, but if he hadn't recognized the tall shape, he would have recognized the great axe the man was twirling in his hands. *Byar. Always Byar.*

Hounding them all day wasn't enough for Byar. He visited them every night, and always paid Perrin special mind. Byar had nothing but spit and scorn for Egwene, but he truly despised Perrin. *You'd think he'd like me a little more, since he wouldn't have the bloody axe without me.* Perrin was so tired he actually chuckled at the thought. Byar finished with the guards and walked quickly toward Perrin and Egwene.

"Is something out here funny, darkfriend?"

"Probably? I'm too tired to tell, really."

Byar's boot found Perrin's jaw quickly, and he rolled back into Egwene, waking her.

"Alright, then," Perrin said, sitting back up. "Alright. Nothing's funny."

Byar set the lantern on the ground and bent down. With his free hand, he jerked Perrin's wrists up, twisting his arms in their sockets, and checked his bonds. Finding them still as tight as he had left them, Byar pulled at Perrin's ankle rope, scraping him across the rocky ground. Perrin just grunted softly. This had become routine.

Byar jerked at Egwene's ropes the same way he had Perrin's, smiling at her groans.

"Up now, darkfriend," Byar said. "Why should you get to sleep you when decent men must stay awake to guard you?"

“I m not— for the hundredth time,” Egwene said, “we aren’ t darkfriends.”

Perrin tensed, waiting for Byar to bury his foot in her ribcage. He was surprised when the Whitecloak ignored Egwene’s denial. As if she hadn’ t said a word, he squatted in front of Perrin with the axe across his knees. The golden sun on the left breast of his cloak, and the two golden stars beneath it, glittered in the lantern light. Byar took off his helmet and set it beside the lantern. He rested his arms on the axe handle and studied Perrin silently. Perrin tried not to shift, but the man had a hollow-eyed stare that chilled the spine.

“You are slowing us down, darkfriend,” he said. “You and your wolves. The Council of the Anointed has heard reports of such things, and they want to know more, so you must be taken to Amador and given to the Questioners. But you are slowing us down. I had hoped we could move fast enough, even without the remounts, but I was wrong.” He fell silent.

Perrin waited; Byar would say more when he was ready.

“The Lord Captain is caught in a dilemma,” Byar said finally. “Because of the wolves he must take you to the Council. But we have a preexisting engagement in Caemlyn, and we cannot be late. We have no spare horses to carry you, but if we continue to let you walk, we will not reach Caemlyn in time. But we have to bring you to Caemlyn, as we must make sure you get to Amador. Yes, it is quite a dilemma.”

Egwene was sitting up beside Perrin now. Byar was staring at Perrin, though. Perrin stared back, almost afraid to blink. “I— I don’ t understand,” he said slowly.

“There is nothing to understand,” Byar replied. “Nothing but idle speculation. If you escaped, we would not have time to track you down. We don’ t have an hour to spare if we are to reach Caemlyn in time. If you frayed your ropes on a sharp rock, say, and vanished into the night, the Lord Captain’s problem would be solved.” Never taking his gaze from Perrin, he reached under his cloak and tossed something on the ground.

Perrin's watched it fall, and gasped when he realized what it was. A rock. A split rock with a sharp edge.

"Just idle speculation," Byar said. "Tonight, your guards also speculate."

Perrin ran his tongue over his teeth and gums, trying to work some moisture into his mouth. *Think it through. Could it be true? Could the Whitecloaks' need to get to Caemlyn quickly be important enough for this? Letting suspected darkfriends escape?* It was no use trying to guess the answer. He just didn't know enough. He had spoken to exactly three Whitecloaks: Lord Captain Bornhald, Child Panet, and Child Byar. None of the three was exactly free with information, unless it was about Questioners' interviewing habits. *If Byar would have us escape, why not simply cut our bonds?* It was a common-sense question, but it was also complete nonsense. This was Byar. Byar, who knew—*knew*—in his dedicated, delusional heart that Perrin and Egwene were darkfriends. Byar, whose hatred for darkfriends was eclipsed only by his hatred for the Dark One itself— and maybe not even by that. Byar, who looked for any excuse to inflict pain on Perrin because he had killed two Whitecloaks. Byar would *never* help them escape.

Perrin tried to slow his mind, but the thoughts came like an avalanche. Despite the cold, rivulets of sweat ran down his face. It was a set up. He and Egwene find a rock and cut their ropes. They run, hoping to escape. Byar—or some other good Whitecloak— kills them in the chase that follows. The Whitecloaks get to push hard for Caemlyn, and Byar has them dead, just like he wanted. *So much for the Lord Captain's dilemma.*

He looked over at the guards. They were no more than grey, shadowy shapes. He couldn't tell if they were poised, waiting, or if he was just imagining it. He looked back at Byar, who picked up his helmet and started to stand.

"Wait," Perrin said. His thoughts tumbled over one another as he searched in vain for some way out. "Wait, I-I-I want to talk. I— "

Help comes!

The thought blossomed in his mind, a clear burst of light in the midst of chaos, so startling that for a moment he forgot everything else, even where he was. In his mind, it was just him and Dapple. *Where is Elyas? Is he alive?* An image came back: Elyas, lying on a bed of evergreen branches beside a small fire in a cave, tending a wound in his side. In all, the exchange took only an instant. He broke into a frank and open grin. *Elyas is alive. Dapple is alive. Help is coming.*

Pausing in an awkward crouch, Byar looked at him. "Some thought has come to you, Perrin of the Two Rivers, and I would know what it is."

For a moment Perrin thought he meant the thought from Dapple. *Help comes.* He felt his whole body clench in panic, then relaxed. *He can't possibly know.* Byar watched his changes of expression, and his eyes went to the rock he had tossed on the ground. *He's reconsidering.* If Byar changed his mind about the rock, would he risk leaving them alive to talk? He could cut the ropes after they were dead.

Byar opened his mouth, and Perrin waited for him to pass sentence on them. Then things began to happen too fast for thought.

One of the guards vanished. One moment there were two dim shapes, the next the night swallowed one of them. The second guard turned and opened his mouth, but before he could cry out there was a solid *tchunk* and he toppled over like a felled tree.

Byar spun, swift as a striking viper, the axe humming in his hands as he swung it. Perrin's eyes bulged as the night seemed to flow into the lantern light, a living shadow. *Fade.* His mouth opened to yell, but his throat locked tight with fear. Then the darkness invading the light became Lan, cloak swirling through shades of grey and black as he moved. Byar lashed out with the axe, and Lan leaned aside casually. The blade passed so close he must have felt the wind of it. Byar's eyes widened as the force of his swing carried him off balance. Lan struck with hands and feet in rapid succession, so quick that Perrin couldn't follow it. It was easy to see Byar collapse like

a puppet, though. Before the Whitecloak had even hit the ground, Lan was on his knees extinguishing the lantern.

Lan seemed to have vanished again.

“It’s you,” Egwene said into the night. “We thought you were dead. We thought you were all dead.”

“Not yet.” The deep whisper was probably as close a thing to laughter as Perrin had heard from Lan.

Swift hands found his bonds in the dark, and a knife sliced through them with barely a tug. He was free. Rubbing his wrists as he stood, he looked at the mound that marked Byar. “Did you— I mean, is he...?”

“No.” Lan’s voice was quiet. “I do not kill unless I mean to. But he won’t bother anyone for a while. Now stop asking questions and get a pair of their cloaks. We haven’t much time.”

Perrin crawled to where Byar lay. His skin crawled as he unfastened the white cloak and pulled it off, pausing for a moment and almost jerking his hands away when he felt the man’s chest rising and falling. He fumbled around till he found his axe, then stood back up. He looked back for Lan and Egwene, but he suddenly had no sense of direction in the darkness. Even Byar was hidden by the night without his white cloak. He had no way to orient himself. Any way he went might be out into the camp.

“Here.”

He stumbled toward Lan’s whisper until hands stopped him. Egwene was there, already in a cloak of her own. Lan’s face was a blur, and the rest of him seemed not to be there at all. “Put on the cloaks,” Lan said, his voice still barely above a whisper. “Quickly. Bundle your own. And make no sound. We’re not safe yet.”

Perrin shrugged into Byar’s cloak and made his own into a bundle to carry. He gripped his axe in one hand and Egwene’s hand with the other. Then he

stood still, waiting for Lan to get on with the escape so his imagination could stop running wild.

“Soon,” Lan whispered. “Very soon.”

Lightning split the night above the camp, so close that Perrin felt the hair on his arms and head lifting as it charged the air. Just beyond the tents the earth erupted from the blow, the explosion on the ground merging with that in the sky. Before the light faded Lan was leading them forward.

At their first step another bolt broke the blackness open, and then lightning came like hail. In a moment it seemed more like flashes of darkness were interrupting the light of noon than bursts of white fire pouring out of the midnight sky. A continuous, rippling peal of thunder drummed through the night. In the brief moments when it faded, they could hear the screams of panicked horses. Men tumbled out of their tents. Some wore their white cloaks and some were only half clothed; some dashed to and fro while some stood still as if stunned.

Before they had taken half a dozen steps, Egwene stopped short and spun back toward Perrin. She wasn't looking at him, though. She was looking past him, into the heart of the Whitecloak camp.

“What's back there, then?” he asked, looking over his shoulder. He must have just missed some lightning strike home among the tents, because he saw two or three burst into flame.

Lan turned and cursed at them to keep moving. The warder grabbed Egwene's free hand and pulled her forward. As they started again, she squeezed Perrin's hand and looked back at him over her shoulder, a mysterious, satisfied smile on her lips.

Lan led them through the camp at a trot, Perrin bringing up the rear. Whitecloaks looked at them, wild-eyed, as they passed. A few shouted at them, the shouts lost in the pounding from the heavens, but no one raised a hand to stop them. Soon the ground turned uneven, and brush slapped them as they went along. The lightning flickered and was soon gone, but echoes

of thunder still rolled across the sky. Perrin looked over his shoulder. Men shouted, voices tiny in the night, trying to restore order and put out the fires still burning among the tents—there were more now, it seemed, perhaps from the lightning or panicked men knocking over lamps. The land began to slope upward, and tents and fires and shouting were left behind.

The terrain was becoming more treacherous, so Perrin focused on each step as if he were still in a halter running alongside Whitecloak horses. He was so fixated on the ground in front of him that he nearly ran up Egwene's back when Lan came to a sudden stop. Ahead in the moonlight stood three horses.

A shadow stirred, and Moiraine Sedai's voice came out of the darkness. "Nynaeve has not returned. I fear that young woman has done something foolish."

Lan let go of Egwene's hand and turned back the way they had come. "I can get—"

"No, Lan," Moiraine Sedai said, cutting him off. Lan stopped, but did not turn back around. "Some things are—"

This time it was Moiraine Sedai who was cut short. A crash of broken branches came from the woods, and in two long strides Lan was between Moiraine Sedai and the sound, sword drawn and gleaming in the moonlight. With more crackling and crashing, a pair of horses burst from the trees, one with a rider.

"Bela!" Egwene said, excitement and joy and relief all mixed up in her voice.

"I almost didn't find you again," Nynaeve said at the same time. "Egwene! You're alive, give thanks." She slid off the horse and wrapped her arms around Egwene. "I knew it. I mean, I *wanted* it. I really wanted it. I was so worried." She looked like a mother with her child, rocking gently back and forth. She kissed Egwene on the forehead and let go.

“You were delayed?” Lan asked her.

“Not as badly as the Children when every horse they had broke free,” Nynaeve said.

“I told you they’d never see you,” Lan said.

Nynaeve grinned, but no one said anything for a moment. When she noticed Perrin looking at her, she turned her grin on him. “And Perrin,” she said as she mounted her mare. “I’m so glad you’re alright.”

“Thank you, Wisdom. It is good to see you again.”

“Yes, well,” she said, her grin fading and a sterner, more familiar look coming over her face. “That’s half of you. It will be good when I see all of you again.”

“Where—” Perrin started. “Where are Mat and Rand?”

“Elsewhere,” Moiraine Sedai said. “The Light send they are well.”

“We will none of us be well,” Lan said, “if the Whitecloaks find us. Change your cloaks and get mounted.”

“Yes, let us away. Egwene, you and I will need to talk about what happened back there. Yes? But now is not the time.”

Egwene hung her head, looking abashed as she climbed into Bela’s saddle. Perrin shook his head; he had no shot at understanding that, so he didn’t try. Instead, he rolled up the white cloak he had used to escape and tied it to his belt. He would have left it behind—he thought he could still smell Byar on it— but Lan said to leave as few traces for the Children to find as possible. He scrambled up onto the other horse Nynaeve had brought. It had no saddle, but Perrin didn’t mind. He didn’t ride much at home, but when he did it was usually bareback.

As they started out with Lan in the lead, Perrin felt Dapple's touch on his mind. *One day again.* More a feeling than words, it sighed with the promise of a meeting foreordained, with anticipation of what was to come, with resignation to the unknown future, all streaked in layers. He tried to ask questions, but he didn't have the words, or rather the language without words, to get them across. As the presence of the wolves grew fainter, Dapple gave only the same answer as before. *One day again.* It hung haunting his mind long after they had left the wolves behind.

Lan pressed southward slowly but steadily. They couldn't move any faster if they wanted. The wilderness wouldn't let them, with its rolling ground and hidden underbrush and shadowed trees thick against the sky. Twice Lan left them, riding his black stallion back toward the slivered moon, the two of them disappearing into the night. Both times he returned to report no sign of pursuit.

Perrin thought it could not be much short of dawn when Moiraine Sedai finally called a halt. Lan found a gully where he could build a fire hidden within a hollow in one of the banks. They were finally able to rid themselves of the white cloaks, burying them in a hole dug near the fire.

"Now," Egwene said, once Lan was shoveling dirt into the hole, "will somebody tell me— where is Rand? Where is Mat?"

"I believe they are in Caemlyn," Moiraine Sedai said, "or on their way there." Nynaeve gave a loud grunt, but the Aes Sedai ignored the interruption. "If they are not, I will yet find them. On my oath, I will."

They made a quiet meal on bread and cheese and hot tea. Perrin sat on the edge of the firelight. Moiraine Sedai and Lan conferred in the dark to his right while Nynaeve tended to Egwene's hurts. She took an ointment out of her bag for the red marks the ropes had left on Egwene's wrists, and a different one for her other bruises. Perrin didn't look up when she came over to him.

She stood looking at him silently for a time, then squatted with her bag beside her. "Take your coat and shirt off, Perrin," she said. "I hear tell that

one of the Whitecloaks took a dislike to you.”

Slowly he stripped to the waist, his mind still half caught on Dapple’s message, until Nynaeve gasped. Startled, he stared at her, then down at his own torso. His ribs were a mass of bruises, and he knew a jumble of lashes from Child Panet’s whip crisscrossed all over his back. Only the muscle he had earned at the forge had saved him from broken ribs or worse. With the wolves filling his mind, Perrin had managed to forget the pain, but the Wisdom’s reminder brought it back in a rush and he almost groaned aloud.

“How could he have hated you so?” Nynaeve asked, looking stunned.

Well, I killed two men.

“I don’t know,” he said.

She rummaged in her bag for an ointment. He flinched and gasped when she began spreading it over his lashes, setting his back on fire. “Ground ivy, five-finger, and sunburst root,” she said. She spread something else over the bruises on his ribs, a paste that was hot and cold at the same time, making him shiver while he broke into a sweat, but he did not protest. He knew Nynaeve’s skill with ointments and poultices. As her fingers gently rubbed the mixture in, the heat and cold vanished, taking the pain with them. The purple splotches faded to brown, and the brown and yellow paled, some disappearing altogether. He took a deep but tentative breath; there was barely a twinge.

“Don’t look so surprised,” Nynaeve said with a smile. Then she tilted her head, thinking, before her mouth twisted in a deep frown. “Next time, you can go to *her*.”

“I’m not surprised,” he said. “Not surprised. Just glad.” Sometimes Nynaeve’s ointments worked fast and sometimes slow, but they always worked. “What— what happened to Rand and Mat?”

Nynaeve began stuffing her vials and pots roughly back into her bag. “*She* says they’re alright. *She* says we’ll find them. In Caemlyn. Says it’s too

important for us not to, whatever *that* means. She says a great bloody many things.”

Perrin grinned in spite of himself; it was just so odd to hear even a hint of coarse language from the Wisdom. And it was somehow comforting that, whatever else had changed, the Wisdom and the Aes Sedai were still far from fast friends.

Then Nynaeve stiffened suddenly, staring at his face. She dropped her bag and pressed the backs of her hands to his cheeks and forehead. He tried to pull back, but she caught his head in both hands and thumbed back his eyelids, peering into his eyes.

“I don’t understand,” she said finally, releasing him and settling back to sit on her heels. “If it were yelloweye fever, you wouldn’t be able to stand. But you don’t have any fever, and the whites of your eyes aren’t yellowed, just the irises.”

“Yellow?” Moiraine Sedai said, and Perrin and Nynaeve both jumped where they sat. The Aes Sedai’s approach had been utterly silent. Perrin looked around the camp. Egwene was already asleep by the fire, wrapped in her cloaks, and Lan stood to the side. Once the surprise wore off, both Nynaeve and Moiraine Sedai were looking into Perrin’s eyes.

Yellow.

“It’s nothing,” he said, but Moiraine Sedai put a hand under his chin and turned his face up so she could peer into his eyes as Nynaeve had. He jerked away. “I said it ain’t nothing.”

“There was no foreseeing this.” Moiraine Sedai spoke as if to herself, her eyes unfocused. “Something ordained to be woven, or a change in the Pattern? If a change, by what hand?”

“Do you know what it is?” Nynaeve asked haltingly. “Can— can you do something for him? Your... Healing?”

Perrin glared at both of them. “If you’re gonna talk *about* me, talk *to* me. I’m sitting right here.”

“Healing?” Moiraine Sedai smiled at Nynaeve. “Healing can do nothing about this. It is not an illness, and it will not...” She hesitated. She did glance at Perrin then, her smile replaced now with look of regret. She turned back to Nynaeve. “I was going to say it will not harm him, but who can say what the end will be? At least I can say it will not harm him directly.”

Nynaeve stood, dusting off her knees, and stood chest to chest with the Aes Sedai. “That’s not good enough. If there’s something wrong with— ”

“What is, is. What is woven already is past changing.” Moiraine Sedai turned away. “We must sleep while we can and leave at first light. If it is the Dark One’s hand changing the Pattern... We must reach Caemlyn quickly.”

Nynaeve snatched up her bag angrily and rushed off. Perrin hardly noticed. *She knows. About the wolves, about— she knows, and she thinks it could be the Dark One.* A shiver ran through him. It could have been the thought or the night air; he didn’t know which. He shrugged hurriedly back into his shirt, tucking it in awkwardly, and pulled his coat and cloak back on. The clothing did not help very much; he felt chilled right to his bones, his marrow like frozen jelly.

Lan dropped to the ground cross-legged, tossing back his cloak. For a long moment they simply stared at one another. The warder’s face was as unreadable as ever, but his eyes held a light of recognition and... something. Sympathy? Curiosity? Both?

“You know?” he said, and Lan nodded.

“I know some, not all. Did it just come to you, or did you meet a... a guide?”

“There was a man,” Perrin said slowly, his eyes returning to the fire. “His name was Elyas.” Lan drew a deep breath, and Perrin looked at him. “You

know him?”

“Elyas Machera.”

“Yes.” *He knows Elyas.*

“I knew him. Long ago, now. He taught me much— about the Blight, and about this.” Lan touched his sword hilt. “He was a warder, before he... before what happened. The Red Ajah...” He glanced toward Moiraine Sedai, lying before the fire.

It was the first uncertainty Perrin remembered seeing in the warder. At Shadar Logoth Lan had been sure and strong. The same when he faced fades and trollocs. He was not *afraid* now, but he was wary, speaking carefully or, now it seemed, not at all.

“I’ve heard of the Red Ajah,” Perrin said.

“And most of what you’ve heard is wrong, no doubt. You must understand, there are... factions within Tar Valon. Some would fight the Dark One one way, some another. The goal is the same, but the differences... the differences can mean lives changed, or ended. The lives of men or nations.” Lan paused. “He is well, Elyas?”

“I think so. The Whitecloaks said they killed him, but Dapple... I don’t know. I think he’s alright.” Perrin didn’t much want to talk about, or even admit to, his thing with the wolves. But if Lan knew about it, and knew about Elyas, and still cared how he was... “This— this communicating with the wolves. Moiraine Sedai seems to think it’s some— something the Dark One did. It ain’t though, right? I mean, ain’t that right?” *Whatever else he may be, Elyas is no darkfriend, I’ll lay oath.*

Perrin was hoping for quick agreement, but Lan hesitated. Sweat started trickling from Perrin’s temples down his face, chill beads made colder by the night.

“No,” Lan finally said. “Not in itself, no. Some believe it is, but they are wrong; it was old and lost long before the Dark One was found. But what of the *chance* of it, blacksmith? Sometimes the Pattern has a randomness to it — to our eyes, at least— but what chance that you should meet a man who could guide you in this thing, and you one who could follow the guiding? The Pattern is forming a great web, what some call the Lace of Ages, and you lads are central to it. I don’t know why, and I don’t think Moiraine knows, either. But I doubt there is much chance left in your lives, now.”

“The Dark One can’t touch us unless we name it.” Perrin paused. *But isn’t it touching us in our dreams, our mad, shared dreams?* He wiped the sweat from his face. “It can’t.”

“Rock-hard stubborn,” Lan said with a small smile. “Maybe stubborn enough to save yourself, in the end.” The smile was gone, and his words took on a heavy air. “In these times, blacksmith, many things are dissolving and breaking apart. Old barriers weaken, old walls crumble. The barriers between what is and what was and what will be. The walls of the Dark One’s prison. We may see one Age end and a new one begin before we die. Or perhaps it is the end of Ages, the end of time itself. Whatever it is, you and I are of a kind, blacksmith. Soldiers. We’ll fight the Shadow as long as we have breath. In the meantime, you’re back among friends, and as safe as a soldier can hope to be. But we had better find the other boys soon, I should say.”

Perrin knew Lan was trying to be reassuring or comforting or something, but he didn’t like much of anything the warder was saying. *I’m no soldier, and I’d rather not spend the rest of my life fighting.* But he didn’t fancy an entire conversation about how he was a soldier whether he willed it or no, and how his story was not his to write. Not tonight. “What do you mean?” he asked. “Are they in danger?”

“We’re all of us in danger, blacksmith, but they have no Aes Sedai touching the True Source to protect them. It may yet be that the walls have weakened enough for the Dark One itself to touch events. Not with a free hand, or we’d be done already, but maybe enough to shift the threads slightly. A

chance turning of one corner instead of another, a chance meeting, a chance word— or what seems like chance— and they could be so far under the Shadow not even Moiraine could bring them back.”

“We— we have to find them,” Perrin said. It was all he could think to say.

“What have I been saying?” Lan asked with a grunt of a laugh. “Get some sleep, blacksmith.” He stood up and swung his cloak around himself again. In the faint light from fire and moon he seemed almost part of the shadows beyond. “We have a hard few days to Caemlyn. Just you hope we find them there.”

“But Moiraine Sedai... she can find them, can’t she?”

“Maybe she can, but can she find them in time? If the Dark One is strong enough to take a hand itself, however indirect, then time is running short. We’d best find them in Caemlyn, blacksmith. If we don’t, we may all be lost.”

The Inner City

Crowds ran shouting along the street, all streaming in the same direction, waving pennants and banners, a thousand white lions standing guard on a thousand fields of red. Rand had never seen so many people, and all running together. Even in a city that had shown naught but division and strife since they'd arrived, today there was only one faction. Everyone was happy to see the false Dragon captured, to see Light triumph over Shadow. Today, everybody celebrated.

“You’re really not coming?” he asked, turning from the window. “All of Caemlyn is going to be in the street, stoned on liquor and whatever else, singing and dancing— do you know how many girls will be out?”

It didn’t work. Mat just stayed curled up in a ball on his bed, glowering at Rand. “Take that abominable lovechild of a depraved stag and a Baerlon whore that you’re so friendly with,” he finally said.

“Blood and ashes, Mat, what’s wrong with you?” Rand was fair shouting. He couldn’t conjure why Mat was so hostile toward Loial. “You know he’s an ogier, and what’s more you know he’s alright. And besides that, your mother taught you better manners than what you’ve been showing, Mat Cauthon.”

“Burn you, al’Thor.” Mat looked like a wounded dog, curled up and snarling. “You don’t know the first thing about me and my Ma. You ain’t never even *had* a ma.” He pushed his face into his pillow and curled himself tighter.

“You— you are really touched, you jackass.” Rand felt his hands balling up in fists, his arms cocking back. *The flame and the void. Flame and void.* “You’re so convinced everyone’s dead? That means I’m all you’ve got. Me. You’d better get your head right. Asshole. Now are you coming or not?”

Mat didn’t answer. He just kept his face buried in his pillow.

“Alright,” Rand said, walking to the door. “If you’re going to spend the whole day in the inn, think about taking a bath.” He stepped into the hallway and heard the door click shut behind him.

He did hope Mat took a bath. He didn’t smell right these past couple of days. *What he really needs is Nynaeve. She’d figure out what was wrong and put it right.* Something was wrong with Mat, of that he was certain. He’d seen firsthand that Mat could be cold and callous, but he’d never seen him be cruel. *I **did** have a mother. If I hadn’t, I wouldn’t notice so much that she was gone.* Rand didn’t want to just wait for Nynaeve on the blind hope that she’d arrive soon, but he had little choice. Herbalists and hedge-doctors were lying low in Caemlyn right now. There was too much talk against anyone who did any kind of healing or fortunetelling. Every night the Dragon’s Fang was scrawled on doors with a free hand, sometimes even in the daylight, and people might forget who had cured their fevers and poulticed their toothaches when the cry of darkfriend went up. Such was the temper in the city.

At the foot of the stairs he met Master Gill just starting up. “There’s someone been asking after you in the city,” the innkeeper said around his pipe. *Moiraine Sedai!* “Asking after you and those friends of yours, by name. You younglings, anyway. Seems to want you three lads most.”

“Do you know who?” Rand asked.

“Not his name. Just heard about him. I hear most things in Caemlyn, eventually. Beggar man.” The innkeeper grunted. “Half mad, I hear. If you want to find him, might try the Palace. Could be taking the Queen’s Bounty. She gives it out with her own hands on High Days. Even a man under warrant can’t be arrested while he’s taking the Queen’s Bounty.”

“You think he’s a darkfriend?” Rand asked in a whisper. *Do the darkfriends know our names now?*

“Darkfriends take up way too much of your worry, lad. Sure, they’re round, but they’re not everywhere. Don’t let the Whitecloaks get you all wound up in passionate fear. Do you know what rumor those fools have started now? ‘Strange shapes.’ Can you believe it? ‘Strange shapes’ creeping around outside the city in the night. They think to scare Caemlyn into becoming Amador with vague and silly rumors.” The innkeeper barked a laugh.

Rand didn’t think it so funny, nor so foolish. “What kind of shapes?”

“What kind? I don’t know what kind. Strange shapes. Trollocs, probably. The Shadowman. Lews Therin, come back fifty feet high. What kind of shapes do you *think* people will imagine now the idea’s in their heads?” Master Gill eyed him for a moment. “Your friend’s staying in again, eh? Well, you watch yourself, now. Good Queen’s men figure to be outnumbered out there, even today. I never thought to see the day. Best you leave by the alleyway. Two of those white-hat traitors are perched across the street watching my front door. They know where I stand.”

Rand stuck his head out and looked both ways, then slipped into the alley. Pushing his sword back a little further under his cloak, he joined the flow of people in the main street. The two men Master Gill had mentioned were standing atop barrels across from the inn, watching over the crowd. They made no secret of their allegiance. Not only were their swords wrapped in white, they wore white armbands and white cockades on their hats.

It was one of the first things Rand had learned after arriving in Caemlyn. You wore the red to support the Queen or the white to blame her, her and her Aes Sedai advisor. Blame them for the weather, for the failed crops—maybe even for the false Dragon. And more wore the white than the red. A lot more—maybe ten to every one. Queen’s men went about in groups for their own protection, when they went out at all. Rand tightened his cloak around his red-clothed scabbard, but he knew it was a futile effort. He had

already chosen his side— even if it had been by accident— and in any case, there was no staying neutral in Caemlyn anymore.

But not today. Today, the city stood together as the false Dragon was brought to the Palace, to be displayed before the Queen before he was taken north to Tar Valon. Or at least that's how it seemed. But Rand noticed that even as the crowd ran— singing, laughing, waving banners— men displaying the red kept together in knots of ten or twenty, and they had no women or children with them. Not for the first time, he wondered if it wouldn't have been better if the white cloth had been the cheaper. *But white would have cost me Master Gill's friendship, and without that I'd be lost. Mat and I both.*

Out in the street, Rand saw that not all hostilities were being put aside for the day. The crowd was so thick that even Whitecloaks didn't enjoy their bubbles of open space, and some people were taking advantage of it. Rand saw one man bump a Whitecloak so hard he barely caught himself before falling to the ground. Then when he straightened up and set in to curse the first man, a second staggered him with a deliberate and directed shoulder. The Whitecloaks' two companions quickly pulled him over to the side of the street and sat him in the shelter of a doorway. Rand couldn't tell if they were shocked or angry. Probably a little of both.

Solid lines of the Queen's Guards and red-cloaked pikemen kept the streets along the procession route clear, but behind the lines people packed in shoulder to shoulder. Even the windows and the rooftops were crammed full of onlookers. Rand worked his way slowly but surely toward the Inner City, trying to get closer to the Palace. If he had his way, he'd see Logain displayed before the Queen. How many chances would he have to see a false Dragon and a Queen, both?

Where streets in the New City mostly crisscrossed every which way in a mad mishmash, in the Inner City they followed the curves of the hills as if they were a natural part of the earth. That was ogier work, as Loial had told him, and Rand could see why they were so famous for it. Sweeping rises and dips presented new and surprising vistas at every turn. He saw parks

from different angles, even from above, where their walks and monuments made lovely patterns (though the late spring had still not brought much green to them); towers that seemed to appear from nowhere, their tile-covered walls glittering in the sunlight with a hundred changing colors; sudden rises where the gaze was thrown out across the entire city to the rolling plains and forests beyond. The only thing that diminished his enjoyment of the Inner City was the crowd that hurried him along before he could really take it in.

The curving streets made it impossible to see very far ahead, and Rand was well surprised when he stumbled upon the Palace quite suddenly. The streets had been laid out to spiral in on this— this gleeman's tale of pale spires and golden domes and intricate stonework traceries, with the banner of Andor waving from every prominence, a centerpiece for which all the other vistas had been designed. It seemed more a sculpture than an ordinary building.

It was plain straight away that he wouldn't get any closer. Queen's Guards flanked the Palace gate in scarlet ranks ten deep. More guards stood atop the white walls, on high balconies and towers, with bows ready to pick off anyone who got too close— not a mad fancy with the crowd nearly solid with white armbands and white cockades and white-wrapped swords. The red-uniformed guards seemed a thin barrier against all that white.

Rand made his way slowly through the constantly shifting crowd until he stood just three people from the open street where the false Dragon would pass. Everyone in front of him was shorter than he was, including the pikemen. He would get to see everything. He'd be close enough to see Logain's face clearly.

Rand noticed a ripple passing through the crowd across the street, working its way up from the direction of the New City. An eddy of people was drawing back to let something go by. They did not look like people deferring to Whitecloaks. These people looked disgusted, pressing themselves out of the way, turning their faces from whatever was coming through, but watching out of the corners of their eyes until it was past.

The ripple meandered through the crowd, drawing closer and closer to the edge of the street. No one seemed to hesitate in letting it go where it wanted, even if that meant losing a good spot. Finally, directly across from Rand, the crowd bulged into the street, pushing aside red-cloaked pikemen who struggled to shove them back, and broke open. The stooped shape that shuffled hesitantly out into the open looked more like a pile of filthy rags than a man. Rand heard murmurs of disgust around him, and some cruel laughter.

The ragged man paused on the far edge of the street. His cowl, torn and stiff with dirt, swung back and forth as if searching for something, or listening. Suddenly he gave a wordless cry and flung out a dirty claw of a hand, pointing straight at Rand. He scuttled across the street like a quick little bug.

The beggar. Whatever ill chance had led the man to find him like this, Rand was suddenly sure that, darkfriend or not, he did not want to meet him. Even with his face hidden by long, matted grey hair, Rand fancied he could feel the beggar's eyes like greasy water on his skin.

Rand tried to beat a fast retreat back the way he'd come, but he knew that however quickly he pushed through, the beggar would be quicker. Disgusted spectators would make way just to avoid the filthy man, giving Rand that much less time to get to the other side. His only chance was his head start, but he wasn't sure it would be enough. He felt like he was trying to run through a sea of honey, getting nowhere, until he was suddenly staggering free on the far side of the crowd. His arms flailed wildly as he regained his balance and turned the stagger into a run. He heard shouting from the crowd. He couldn't make out what they were saying, and it didn't really matter. All he could do was run faster. Not until he had left the shouts far behind did he allow himself to collapse against a wall, panting.

He didn't know where he was, except that he was still within the Inner City. He couldn't remember how many twists and turns he had taken. Ready to run again, he looked back the way he had come. Only one person moved on the street, a woman walking placidly along with her shopping basket. The

streets were empty; everyone in the city was gathered for a glimpse of the false Dragon.

Rand had lost him for now, but the beggar would not give up, of that Rand was sure. He didn't know who the beggar was, or what he wanted with Rand, Mat, and Perrin, but he knew that ragged shape was working its way through the crowds at that very minute, searching, hunting. He considered going back to The Queen's Blessing, but he was loath to give up his only shot at seeing Logain—or a real Queen, for that matter. *I'll not be so craven as to let a bent beggar chase me into hiding, darkfriend or no.*

Still, he couldn't just go back the way he came. That would be inviting a meeting with the beggar. He looked around, considering. The buildings in the Inner City were kept low, so that someone standing at a particular spot would have nothing to interrupt the planned view. There had to be places from where he could see the procession pass with the false Dragon. Even if he could not see the Queen, he could see Logain. Determined, he hid his sword under his cloak and set off.

In the next hour he found several such places, but each was already packed cheek-to-cheek with others who'd had the same idea. He could have tried to worm his way in, or even peer over the top of the people, but he saw nothing but white armbands and cockades. Carefully and quickly, he slipped away.

From the New City he heard shouts and cries and the blaring of trumpets. The martial beat of drums was escorting Logain through Caemlyn to the Palace. Rand hadn't found a viewing spot, and now he was going to miss the procession altogether. Feeling low, he drifted the empty streets, halfheartedly looking for some way to see Logain. He ended up on a wide lane with a slope rising above it. It was bare of buildings, and by rights should have been covered with flowers and grass, but this year it was brown from the street all the way to the high wall along its crest. On the other side of the wall, he could see the tops of trees. *I bet you could see the procession from up there.* With the drums and trumpets drawing nearer, he scrambled up the slope. It was not meant to be climbed, but he dug his boots into the

dead sod and pulled himself up using leafless shrubs as handholds. He was breathing hard by the time he reached the base of the wall. It reared above him, easily twice his height and more. The air thundered with the drumbeat, rang with trumpet blasts. The crowds were roaring now. Logain was getting closer.

The face of the wall had been left much in the natural state of the stone, the huge blocks fitted together so well that the joins were nearly invisible, the roughness making it seem almost a natural cliff. Rand grinned. The cliffs just beyond the Sand Hills were higher, and *everyone* had climbed those. He grabbed a couple of rocky knobs and started up, racing against the drums. The stone tore his hands and scraped his knees through his breeches as he scrambled as quickly as he could. When he flung his arms over the top and heaved himself up, he laughed with a sense of victory.

He straddled the wall, then turned about so he was sitting on its flat, narrow top, looking down over the Inner City and all of Caemlyn. The leafy branches of a towering tree stuck out over his head, but he had a fine view of everything below him— and when he leaned out, just a little, he could see the Palace gate. The Queen's Guards still stood there, and the crowd still waited. The thunder of drums and trumpets was close enough to drown out their shouts, but the procession had yet to reach the gate. He grinned. *I won.*

Even as he settled in place, the first part of the procession rounded the final curve before the Palace. Twenty ranks of trumpeters came first, splitting the air with peal after triumphant peal, a fanfare of victory. Behind them, just as many drummers thundered. Then came the banners of Caemlyn, white lions on red, borne by mounted men, followed by the soldiers of Caemlyn— rank on rank on rank of horsemen, armor gleaming, lances held proudly, crimson pennants fluttering in the cold spring wind. Treble rows of pikemen and archers flanked them, and came on and on after the horsemen began passing between the waiting Guards and through the Palace gate.

The last of the foot soldiers rounded the curve, and behind them was a massive wagon. Sixteen horses pulled it in hitches of four. In the center of its flat bed was a large cage of iron bars, and on each corner of the

wagonbed sat two women, watching the cage as intently as if the procession and the crowd did not exist. *Aes Sedai*. Between the wagon and the footmen, and to either side, rode a dozen warders, their cloaks swirling and tangling the eye. The Aes Sedai paid the crowd no mind, but the warders watched it as if they were the only guards out today.

With all of that, it was the man in the cage who caught and held Rand's eyes. He was not close enough to see Logain's face, but looking at him now, he was as close as he wanted to be. The man was tall, with long, dark hair curling around his broad shoulders. He held himself upright against the sway of the wagon with one hand on the bars above his head. His clothes seemed ordinary, a cloak and coat and breeches that would have gone unnoticed and unremarked upon in Emond's Field. But the *way* he wore them. The way he held himself. Logain was a king in every inch of him. The cage might as well not have been there. He stood tall, head high, and looked over the crowd as if they had come to do him honor. And wherever his gaze swept, there the people fell silent. When Logain's looked away, they screamed with redoubled fury as if to make up for their silence. As the wagon rolled through the Palace gate, he turned to look back at the assembled masses. They howled at him, beyond words, a wave of sheer animal hate and fear, and Logain threw back his head and laughed as the Palace swallowed him.

Other contingents followed behind the wagons, with banners representing more who had helped defeat the false Dragon. The Golden Bees of Illian, the three White Crescents of Tear, the Rising Sun of Cairhien, and many others that Rand didn't recognize, of nations and cities and men, all with their own trumpets, their own drums to declare their greatness. None of it seemed interesting after having seen Logain.

Rand leaned out a bit further to try to catch one last sight of the caged man. Overbalanced for a second, he slipped and grabbed at the top of the wall, then pulled himself back to a somewhat safer seat. The rush of racing up the slope and then seeing Logain was beginning to fade, and Rand became aware of the burning where the stone had scraped his palms and fingers. He blew on them and reflected on what he had seen, the images that remained

vivid in his mind. The cage and the Aes Sedai. Logain, undefeated, for all that he was in a cage. *Are they sure he is a **false** Dragon?* Rand shivered.

“I wonder why the Aes Sedai were watching him,” he said to himself.

“To keep him from touching the True Source, silly.”

He turned his head to find the girl’s voice, but without his hands on the wall he lost his balance and toppled backward, falling, until something struck his head and a laughing Logain chased him into spinning darkness.

At the Heart of It

The snow swirled in a vicious, driving wind, and the sky was an unbroken white. Rand stood on the slopes of a great mountain that towered above him until it disappeared in the blizzard. It was taller than the tallest peak from his imagination. He'd never seen anything like it. *I've been here before.* This place felt half like a memory and half like a dream. For a moment he expected Væ'alza to appear, but somehow he knew it wouldn't.

From somewhere nearby he heard a baby crying; the sound barely cut through the storm. He fought his way up the slope— a hundred feet, two hundred. He came upon a woman holding a newborn, both covered in blood. He didn't know the mother, but he felt like he should.

Rand knelt down to see if he could help, but the woman was dead. Her trousers were off, cast to the side, and blood caked the inside of her thighs. *She died giving birth.* The babe, a boy, was crying, screaming, as loudly as he could. Rand took his tiny, bloody hand, and the crying stopped. The newborn turned to Rand and looked at him with the same grey eyes Rand had seen in looking glasses all his life, with the same reddish hair atop his head. *It's me.* Shocked, he looked at the woman again, and saw that her face was an echo of his own. For true, he saw more of his own face in hers than he ever had in Father's. *Who are you?*

His head spinning, Rand stood and tried to step back, but lost his footing and tumbled ten paces down the mountain. He stopped himself and scrambled back up the slope, but when he saw the woman again, she was alive and sitting up, rocking the baby in her arms. Her clothes were the same blood-soaked rags, but she wore a different face now. This one he did

know— a faded memory brought suddenly back to life. *Mother*. She saw him and flashed that wide, curving smile that he remembered. He took a tentative step forward, then another. *Mother*. His face broke into a grin and he quickened his pace. He was just a few steps away when a sudden snowsquall hid her from view. Rand ran forward, but the snow died suddenly and Mother was standing before him, only it wasn't Mother. It was Moiraine Sedai. She was naked, standing up, nursing the grey-eyed baby at her left breast.

“The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills,” she said.

“Mother?” Rand asked.

Moiraine Sedai closed the gap between them with two steps, then reached up and kissed Rand on the mouth.

“Before I let the Dark One have you, I will destroy you myself.”



“Mother!” Rand sat up with a jerk and immediately groaned, clutching his head. His whole skull hurt. The hair behind his left ear was sticky and wet. He was sitting on the ground, on green grass. His head was spinning and everything he looked at lurched. The place seemed to be some sort of garden, or a park; a slate-paved walk meandered by through flowering bushes not six feet away, with a white stone bench beside it and a leafy arbor over the bench for shade.

I'm on the other side of the wall. I fell off and into this...park? And where's the girl?

He looked up, head swimming, and saw the tree that overhung the spot on the wall where he had been perched. And there was the girl whose voice had startled him, climbing down from its branches. She reached the ground

and turned to face him, and he blinked and groaned again. *Now I've done it. This is some sort of highborn lady's garden.*

A deep blue velvet cloak lined with pale fur rested on the girl's shoulders, its hood hanging down behind to her waist. A silver filigree circlet held her long, red-gold curls back from her face, and delicate silver rings hung at her ears. She wore a necklace of heavy silver links and dark green stones he thought must be emeralds. The smudges and scratches on her pale blue dress didn't look quite so highborn, but it was still silk, and embroidered with impossibly intricate designs. Velvet slippers peeked out from under the hem.

The only person he'd ever seen wear such clothes was Moiraine Sedai, and this girl had something of the same air— confident, self-possessed, important. It wasn't just her clothes. There was something in her eyes— a rich blue, not icy like Lan's, but warm like a clear summer sky. She did not seem the least bit troubled at having a stranger tumble into her garden. She clearly felt she was in full control of the situation, even if she looked a couple of years younger than Rand. Tall, though. Quite beautiful, too, now that he looked. No more beautiful than Egwene, but no less either, for all that they looked nothing alike.

A scrabbling sound came from up in the tree and bits of bark fell, followed by a boy dropping lightly to the ground behind her. He was a head taller than she and a little older, but his face and hair marked him as her close kin. His coat and cloak were red and white and gold, embroidered and brocaded, and no less ornate than hers. Rand had certainly never seen a man (or boy) in such fine clothes, or anything close. These two were probably even higher born than he'd first thought.

I don't guess this is how to keep a low profile while I'm in Caemlyn. At least I know Mat isn't getting himself noticed by important people.

The boy studied Rand over the girl's shoulder, fingering the dagger at his waist absently. Rand wasn't sure if it were a menacing gesture or just the

workings of idle hands. The boy had the same self-possession as the girl, and they both looked at him as if he were a puzzle to be solved.

“We will never hear the end of this if Mother finds out,” the boy said. “No way could we find this boy here in the garden were we in our rooms as she told us to be. I still do not know why you just *had* to get a glimpse of Logain. Now look what it has gotten us.”

“Quiet, Gawyn.” She was clearly the younger of the two, but she seemed just as self-possessed and in control with her brother as she had with Rand. Her voice carried an authority, a finality. The boy, Gawyn, looked like he had more to say, but he held his peace. “Are you alright?” she asked.

It took Rand a minute to realize she was speaking to him. When he did, he tried to spring to his feet. “I’m fine. I just—” He tottered and his legs gave way. He sat back down hard. His head swam. “I’ll just climb back over the wall,” he mumbled. He tried to stand again, but the girl put a hand on his shoulder and held him down. He was too dizzy to fight her.

“You *are* hurt.” She knelt beside him. She had a grace to her movements.

It was striking how much she reminded him of Moiraine Sedai. *Moiraine Sedai*. He remembered his dream. Mother. The baby. Moiraine Sedai, naked, promising to destroy him.

The girl’s fingers gently parted the blood-matted hair on the left side of his head. “You must have struck a branch coming down. You will be lucky not to have broken anything more than your scalp. I doubt I have ever seen anyone as skillful at climbing as you, but you do not do so well falling.”

“You will get blood on your hands,” he said, drawing back.

She pulled his head back to where she could get at it. “Hold still.” She did not speak sharply, but her voice carried that same note of authority. “It does not look *too* bad. Give me your water flask, Gawyn.”

The boy unfastened a leather bottle from his belt and handed it to her, then squatted easily at Rand's feet with his arms folded on his knees. The water was cold when she washed the cut in his scalp. He didn't flinch, but she still held the top of his head with one hand as if she expected him to pull away again.

"Elayne is always finding stray cats and birds with broken wings," Gawyn said. "This may be the first time she has ever tended to a wounded person before, though." He hesitated, then added, "Do not be offended. I am not calling you a stray." From Perrin, those would be words of apology. From this boy, they were just a statement of fact.

"No offense taken," Rand said. "But you needn't treat me like a skittish colt."

Elayne ignored their banter, pulling a silk scarf from her belt, blue and cream and gold. For any girl in Emond's Field it would have been a treasured feastday cloth, but Elayne used it to try to stop the bleeding.

"You'll ruin it," he said, trying to pull away.

She held his head in place. "I told you to be still," she said calmly.

Rand looked at Gawyn. "Does she always expect everybody to do what she tells them?"

The boy cocked his head in surprise, then grinned. "Most of the time she does. And most of the time they do."

"Hold this," Elayne said. "The bleeding is really not so bad. It should stop in a few—" She caught her breath at the sight of his hands. "You did not do that falling. Climbing where you should not have been climbing is more like it. Well, those will need an ointment or a salve. More than I carry on my person." Still, she used the rest of Gawyn's water to clean Rand's hands as best she could.

“Most of the time they do exactly what she says,” Gawyn went on, still grinning. “Most people. Not Mother, of course. Or Elaida. And not Lini. Lini was her nurse. You cannot give orders to someone who switched you for stealing figs when you were little. And even not so little.” Elayne raised her head long enough to glare at her brother. He cleared his throat and blanked his expression before hurrying on. “And Gareth, of course. No one gives orders to Gareth.”

“Not even Mother,” Elayne said, standing. “She makes suggestions, and he always does what she suggests, but I have never heard her give him a command.”

“I do not know why that always surprises you,” Gawyn said, also rising to his feet. “Even you never try telling Gareth what to do. He has served three Queens, two as Captain-General and First Prince Regent. I daresay there are some think he is more a symbol of the Throne than the Queen herself.”

“Mother should go ahead and marry him,” she said. “She cannot hide that she wants to, not from me. And it would solve so many problems.”

Gawyn shook his head. “One of them must bend first. Mother cannot, and Gareth will not.”

“If she commanded him— ”

“He would obey. I think. But she will not. You know that.”

They both stopped to look at Rand. He had almost thought that they had forgotten him completely. He had their attention now, though.

“Who— ?” he said after a moment’s silence. “Um, who is your mother?”

Elayne’s eyes went wide, but Gawyn spoke in an ordinary tone that gave his words all the more weight. “Morgase, by the Grace of the Light, Queen of Andor, Defender of the Realm, Protector of the People, High Seat of the House Trakand.”

Rand worked his mouth silently for a second. “The Queen.” For a minute he thought his head was going to start spinning again. *Yup. Low profile.* He wanted to laugh, which only meant he was close to panic. Drawing a deep breath, he scrambled hastily to his feet. He was dizzy but kept his balance. He was desperate to run, to get away, but he held the urge in check.

Elayne and Gawyn watched him calmly. He took the scarf away from his head, and Elayne seized his elbow. “Stop that. You will start the bleeding again.” Her voice was still calm, still sure that he would do as she said.

“I have to go,” Rand said. “I’ll just climb back over the wall and— ”

“You *really* did not know,” she said with a note of amazement. “Do you mean you climbed up on that wall to see Logain without even knowing where you were? You could have gotten a much better view down in the streets.”

“I, uh, I don’t like crowds,” he said. He tried to bow but had to stop halfway down for the dizziness. “If you’ll pardon me, ah, my Lady— ” *Is that right? Is it “my Lady” for the Daughter-Heir?* He had no idea. The only idea he had about anything, really, was to get far away as quickly as possible. “If you will pardon me, I’ll just leave now. Thank you for the— the— ” He pressed the scarf a little harder against his wound, though he doubted she could see that. “Thank you.”

“Without even telling us your name?” Gawyn said. “A poor payment for Elayne’s care. I have been wondering about you. You sound like an Andorman— not a Caemlyner, certainly, but an Andorman— but you look like... Well, you know our names. Courtesy would suggest you give us yours.”

Rand looked longingly at the wall. “Rand al’ Thor,” he said before he could think to lie, “from Emond’s Field, in the Two Rivers.”

“From the west?” Gawyn said softly. He sounded surprised. “Very far to the west.”

“What’s this?”

All three of them jumped at the sudden voice. Rand, still a little lightheaded, stepped back until he was leaning against the wall. Elayne and Gawyn spun to see who had spoken.

Standing there was the handsomest man Rand had ever seen. He might even have called him beautiful. He was tall and slender, moving with an obvious strength and grace, and confidence to match Elayne’s. He had dark eyes, and dark hair that fell straight to his shoulder. His clothes were red and white like Gawyn’s, and only a little less elaborate. One hand rested on his sword hilt, and his eyes were steady on Rand.

“Stand away from him, Elayne,” the man said. “You, too, Gawyn.”

Elayne stepped in front of Rand, between him and the newcomer, head high and as confident as ever. “He is a loyal subject of our mother, and a good Queen’s man. And he is under my protection, Galad.”

Rand tried to remember what Master Gill had told him. Galadreid Damodred was Elayne’s half-brother, Elayne’s and Gawyn’s, if he remembered correctly; the three shared the same father.

“I am aware of your fondness for strays, Elayne,” Galad said, “but the fellow is armed, and he hardly looks reputable. In these days, we cannot be too careful. If he is a loyal Queen’s man, what is he doing here where he does not belong? It is easy enough to change the wrappings on a sword.”

“He is here as my guest, Galad, and I vouch for him. Or have you appointed yourself my nurse, to decide to whom I may speak, and when?”

Her voice was rich with scorn, but Galad seemed unmoved. “You know I make no claims for control over your actions, Elayne, but this... guest of yours is not proper. You know that as well as I. Gawyn, help me convince her. Our mother would— ”

“Enough!” Elayne snapped. “You are quite right that you have no say over my actions, nor have you any right to judge them. You may leave me. Now!”

Galad gave Gawyn a rueful look; whether he was asking for help or offering commiseration Rand couldn't say. Elayne's face darkened, but just as she opened her mouth again, he bowed, precisely formal yet graceful as a cat, then turned and strode down the paved path. His long legs carried him quickly out of sight beyond the arbor.

“I *hate* him,” Elayne said through clenched teeth. “He is vile and full of envy.”

“You go too far, Elayne,” Gawyn said. “I doubt Galad is even capable of envy. Twice he has saved my life, with none to know if he held his hand. If he had not, he would be your First Prince of the Sword in my place.”

“Never, Gawyn. I would choose anyone before Galad. The— the lowest stable boy.” She smiled and crossed her arms. “You say I am fond of giving orders. Well, here are yours. I command you to let nothing happen to you. I command you to be my First Prince of the Sword when I take the throne— many, many, many years from now— and to lead the armies of Andor with the sort of honor Galad cannot dream of.”

“As you command, my Lady.” Gawyn laughed, his bow a parody of Galad's.

Elayne gave Rand a thoughtful frown. “Now we must get you out of here, and quickly.”

“Galad always does the right thing,” Gawyn explained, “even when he should not. Or rather, he is guided by rules, not by conscience. In this case, the rules say he should notify the Palace guards that we have a stranger in the gardens. Which I suspect he is on his way to do right this minute.”

“I— I— uh— ” Rand said, “I need to go.” He stepped toward the tree, which he guessed would be easier to climb than the wall. *If the Queen's Aes Sedai*

fnds me... I should have just stayed with Mat.

Elayne caught his arm. “Not after the trouble I went to with your hands. There is a small gate on the other side of the garden. It is overgrown, and no one but me even remembers it exists.”

The sound of boots on paving stones came from beyond the arbor.

“Too late,” Gawyn said under his breath. “He must have started running as soon as he was out of sight.”

“Oh, up his ass with a hedgehog,” Elayne said with a growl. She took one breath and was all cool self-possession once again. Rand’s eyebrows shot up. That kind of language had been shocking enough from the stablemen at The Queen’s Blessing, but from the Daughter-Heir?

Gawyn and Elayne appeared content to remain where they were, but Rand couldn’t just wait for the Queen’s Guards. He started toward the tree again, knowing he wouldn’t even reach the branches before the guards arrived. Before he had taken three steps, red-uniformed men burst into sight, breastplates catching the sun as they dashed up the path. Others came like breaking waves of scarlet and polished steel, seemingly from every direction. Some held drawn swords; others waited only to set their boots before raising bows and nocking feathered shafts. Behind the barred faceguards every eye was grim, and every broadhead arrow was pointed unwaveringly at him.

Elayne and Gawyn leapt as one, putting themselves between him and the arrows, their arms spread to cover him. He stood very still and kept his hands in plain sight, away from his sword.

One of the soldiers shouted, “My Lady, my Lord, down, quickly!” He had a golden knot on his shoulder. Probably an officer.

Even with outstretched arms, Elayne drew herself up regally. “You dare to bring bare steel into my presence, Tallanvor? Gareth Bryne will have you mucking stables with the meanest trooper for this. *If* luck favors you.”

The soldiers exchanged puzzled glances, and some of the bowmen uneasily half lowered their bows. Elayne let her arms down then, but with an ease that said it had nothing to do with the lowering of the bows, just as having her arms out had been nothing more than her fancy at the time. Gawyn hesitated, then followed her example. Rand counted the bows that had not been lowered. His stomach joined his head in dizziness. He felt like sicking up.

The man with the golden knot seemed most perplexed of all. "My Lady, forgive me, but Lord Galadreid reported a dirty peasant skulking in the gardens, armed and endangering my Lady Elayne and my Lord Gawyn." His eyes went to Rand. "If my Lady and my Lord will please to step aside, I will take the villain into custody. There is too much riff-raff in the city these days."

"I doubt very much if Galad reported anything of the kind," Elayne said. "Galad does not lie."

"Sometimes I wish he would," Gawyn said softly over his shoulder. "Just once. It might make living with him easier."

"This man is my guest," Elayne continued, "and here under my protection. You may withdraw, Tallanvor."

"I regret that will not be possible, my Lady. As my Lady knows, the Queen, your lady mother, has given orders regarding anyone on Palace grounds without Her Majesty's permission, and word has been sent to Her Majesty of this intruder."

Elayne said nothing. Rand wondered what look she wore on her face now. Anger? Confusion?

"And now?" he whispered, leaning forward into Gawyn's ear.

"Prison," Gawyn said softly. Rand's stomach knotted. "Only for a few days, and you will not be harmed. Gareth Bryne, the Captain-General, will likely question you personally, but you will be set free once it is clear you meant

no harm.” He paused. “I hope you were telling the truth, Rand al’ Thor from the Two Rivers.”

“You will conduct all three of us to my mother,” Elayne said suddenly, with all the force of a royal pronouncement. A grin bloomed on Gawyn’s face, then he faced front again.

“My Lady, I— ”

“Or else conduct all three of us to a cell,” Elayne said. “We will remain together. Or will you give orders for hands to be laid upon my person?”

Tallanvor looked around as if he expected to find help in the trees. Elayne had won. Rand didn’t know how, or what, but she had won.

“Mother is viewing Logain,” Gawyn said, as if he had read Rand’s thoughts, “and even if she were not busy, Tallanvor would not dare troop into her presence with Elayne and me, as if *we* were under guard. Mother has a bit of a temper, sometimes.”

So I’ve heard. What would Master Gill say if he could see me now?

Another red-uniformed soldier came running down the path, skidding to a halt to salute with an arm across his chest. He spoke softly to Tallanvor, who smiled at the man’s report. When Tallanvor spoke, his tone said that he and Elayne had swapped positions, that he was now the victor.

“The Queen, your lady mother,” he said, “commands me to bring the intruder to her immediately. It is also the Queen’s command that my Lady Elayne and my Lord Gawyn attend her. Also immediately.”

Rand heard Gawyn draw a sharp breath. Elayne began wiping her hands on her dress, brushing a few pieces of bark off, but not saying anything.

“If my Lady pleases?” Tallanvor said. “My Lord?”

The soldiers formed around them in a hollow box that started along the slate path with Tallanvor leading. Rand dabbed at his scalp with scarf— the bleeding seemed to have stopped— before putting it in his coat pocket. Gawyn and Elayne walked on either side of him, both appearing lost in unpleasant thoughts. The soldiers had sheathed their swords and returned arrows to quivers, but still watched Rand as if he would snatch his sword and at any moment try to cut his way to freedom.

Perhaps he was avoiding thoughts of prison or worse, but Rand suddenly noticed the garden itself. With all that had happened, the greenery had only tickled the back of his mind before. Now that he looked, he saw a hundred shades of green. Trees and bushes green and thriving, thick with leaves and fruit. Lush vines covering arbors over the path. Flowers everywhere. So many flowers, spraying the garden with color. Some he knew— bright golden sunburst and tiny pink tallowend, crimson starblaze and purple Emond's Glory, roses in every color from purest white to deepest red— but others were strange, so fanciful in shape and hue he wondered if they could be real.

"It's green," he whispered. "Green." The soldiers muttered to one another; Rand couldn't make out the words. Tallanvor gave them a sharp look over his shoulder and they fell silent.

"Elaida's work," Gawyn said absently.

"It is not right," Elayne said. "She asked if I wanted to pick out the one farm she could do the same for, while all around it the crops still failed, but it is still not right for us to have flowers when some Andorans have too little to eat." She drew a deep breath, and regained her self-possession.

"Remember yourself," she said to Rand. "Speak up clearly when you are spoken to, and keep silent otherwise. And follow my lead. All will be well."

Rand wished he could share her confidence. It would have helped if Gawyn had seemed to have it as well, but the first prince looked near as nervous as Rand. As Tallanvor led them into the Palace, Rand looked back at all the

green streaked with blossoms, colors wrought for a Queen by an Aes Sedai's hand. *Deep water, and no bank in sight.*

Palace servants filled the halls, in red liveries with collars and cuffs of white, scurrying about, intent on whatever they were doing, which seemed mostly to be scurrying about. When the soldiers trooped by with Elayne and Gawyn and a strange boy in their midst, many of the servants froze and gaped at them.

A grey-striped cat wandered unconcernedly down the hall, weaving between the goggling servants. Rand realized it was the only one he'd seen.

"Not many cats," he said. "What do you do about rats?"

"Elaida does not care for rats," Gawyn said absently. He wore a worried frown, likely thinking on the coming meeting with the Queen. "We never have rats."

"Both of you be quiet." Elayne's voice was sharp, but as absent as her brother's. "I am trying to think."

Rand watched the cat over his shoulder until they rounded a corner and he lost sight of it. A lot of cats would have made him feel better. It would have been nice if there were one thing normal about the Palace, even if it were rats.

They turned right and left so many times walking through the Palace halls that Rand lost all sense of direction. Finally Tallanvor stopped before tall double doors of dark wood with a rich glow, not so grand as some they had passed, but still carved all over with rows of lions, wrought in fine detail. A servant stood to either side.

"Well, at least it is not the Grand Hall." Gawyn gave a hollow laugh. "I have never heard of Mother ordering anyone's head cut off from here."

Comforting.

Tallanvor reached for Rand's sword, but Elayne moved to cut him off. "He is my guest, and by custom and law, guests of the royal family may go armed even in Mother's presence. Or will you deny my word that he is my guest?"

Tallanvor hesitated, locking eyes with her, then nodded. "Very well, my Lady." She smiled at Rand as Tallanvor stepped back, but it lasted only a moment. "First rank to accompany me," Tallanvor said. "Announce the Lady Elayne and the Lord Gawyn to Her Majesty," he told the doorkeepers. "Also Guardsman-Lieutenant Tallanvor, at Her Majesty's command, with the intruder under guard."

As the doors swung open, a sonorous voice announced those who entered.

Elayne swept through the doors, spoiling her regal entrance only a little by motioning for Rand to keep close behind her. Gawyn came in flanking her, one measured pace to her rear. Rand followed, uncertain, trying to keep level with Gawyn on her other side. Tallanvor stayed close to Rand, and ten soldiers came with him. The doors closed silently behind them.

Rand looked about. The square chamber was about the size of the common room at The Queen's Blessing. The walls were stone of the purest white, with hunting scenes carved in deep relief. Tapestries of tranquil nature scenes—bright flowers, colorful hummingbirds—hung between the carvings. At the far end of the room hung two tapestries identical to each other but different than all the rest—the White Lion of Andor, standing taller than a man, on endless fields of scarlet. Those two flanked a dais, and on the dais sat a carved and gilded throne, and in the throne sat the Queen.

At her right hand stood a bareheaded man wearing the red of the Queen's Guards, with four golden knots on the shoulder of his cloak and wide golden bands breaking the white of his cuffs. He was all squares—square head, square jaw, square shoulders—which made it look like no wind or flood could make him move his feet. *The Captain-General, Gareth Bryne.* Behind the throne and to the other side, a woman in deep green silk sat on a low stool, knitting something out of dark wool. At first the knitting made

Rand think she was old, but at second glance he could not put an age to her at all. Young, old, he did not know. *Like Moiraine. Aes Sedai. This must be Elaida.* She paid him no more mind than she paid the Queen. Her attention seemed to be entirely on her needles and yarn, whose clicking was the only sound in the entire room.

He was just about to look more closely at the Queen— *the Queen!*— when Elayne stopped and dropped into a deep curtsy. Holding her skirt wide, she bowed from the waist and stayed there. Fighting the panic of being in six feet over his head, Rand hastily emulated Gawyn and the other men, shifting awkwardly until he had it right. Down on his right knee, head bowed, bending forward to press the knuckles of his right hand against the marble tiles, his left hand resting on the end of his sword hilt. Gawyn, without a sword, put his hand on his dagger the same way.

Rand started to breathe a sigh of relief, then saw Tallanvor, his head still bent, glaring sideways at him from behind his faceguard. *Was I supposed to do something else? How could I know what to do?* Rand's fear suddenly turned into anger— he had done nothing to be fearful for. By what right did these people claim the authority to frighten him?

“You may rise,” the Queen said in a rich, warm voice that held Elayne's assurance of obedience a hundred times over.

Rand stood and raised his head— the dizziness was almost gone— to look at the Queen. She was grander than whatever notion he'd had in his head. A gleaming wreath of finely wrought roses sat on her brow— the Rose Crown of Andor. A long red stole, the Lion of Andor marching along its length, hung over her silken dress of red and white pleats. And however rich and luxurious her clothing, the woman herself was more so. Queen Morgase had her daughter's beauty, matured and ripened. Her face and figure, her presence, filled the room like a light that dimmed the man and woman at her sides.

“Mother— ” Elayne began, but the Queen cut her off.

“You have been climbing trees, it seems, daughter.” The Queen’s voice was calm, matter of fact. Elayne plucked a stray fragment of bark from her dress and, finding there was no place to put it, held it clenched in her hand.

“Indeed, it would seem that— despite my orders to the contrary— you have contrived to take your look at this Logain. Gawyn, I have thought better of you. You must learn not only to obey your sister, but at the same time to be a counterweight for her against disaster.” The Queen glanced quickly at the blocky man beside her before returning her attention to Gawyn. “That is as much the duty of the First Prince as is leading Andor’s armies. Perhaps if your training is intensified, you will find less time for letting your sister lead you into trouble. I will ask the Captain-General to see that you do not lack for things to do on the journey north.”

Gawyn shifted his feet, then bowed his head. “As you command, Mother.”

“Mother,” Elayne said, “Gawyn cannot keep me out of trouble if he is not with me. It was for that reason alone he left his rooms. Surely there could be no harm in just looking at Logain. Almost everyone in the city was closer to him than we.”

“Everyone in the city is not the Daughter-Heir. I have just seen this fellow Logain from close, and he is dangerous, child. Caged, with Aes Sedai to guard him every minute, he is still as dangerous as a wolf. I wish he had never been brought near Caemlyn.”

“He will be dealt with in Tar Valon.” The woman on the stool did not take her eyes from her knitting as she spoke. “What is important is that the people see that the Light has once again vanquished the Dark. And that they see you are part of that victory, Morgase.”

Morgase waved a dismissive hand. “I would still rather he had never come near Caemlyn. Elayne, I know your mind.”

“Mother,” Elayne said, “I do mean to obey you. Truly I do.”

“You do?” Morgase asked with an exaggerated gasp. She chuckled, then continued. “Yes, you do try to be a dutiful daughter. But you constantly test

how far you may go. Well, I did the same with my mother. That spirit will stand you in good stead when you ascend to the throne, but you are not Queen yet, child. You have disobeyed me and had your look at Logain. Be satisfied. On the journey north you will not be allowed within one hundred paces of him, neither you nor Gawyn. If I did not know just how hard your lessons will be in Tar Valon, I would send Lini along to see that you obey. She, at least, seems able to make you do as you must.”

Elayne bowed her head. The Queen absently fingered a ring on her left hand, a ring in the shape of the Great Serpent, eating its own tail. A ring like Moiraine Sedai’s. *Is the Queen herself Aes Sedai?* Rand had trouble believing that, with all the talk around Caemlyn about the Queen and Elaida, he wouldn’t have heard at some point that the Queen was Aes Sedai. The ring must mean something else. Still, odd that it was so like Moiraine Sedai’s.

Elaida Sedai spoke again, but still seemed occupied with counting her stitches. “In one week, you will be wanting to come home to your mother. In a month you will be wanting to run away with the Traveling People. But my sisters will keep you away from the man. That sort of thing is not for you, not yet.” She set her knitting down in her lap and turned to look intently at Elayne. “You have it in you to be the greatest Queen that Andor has ever seen, that any land has seen in more than a thousand years. It is for that we will shape you, if you have the strength for it.”

Elaida Sedai was like Moiraine Sedai— both commanded attention, both had a grace and a power— but she was also different. The woman in front of him now had a sternness, a *hardness*, that Moiraine Sedai did not. He was glad now that he had not come to her for help.

“Enough, Elaida,” Morgase said with a slight frown. “She has heard that more than enough. The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills.” For a moment she was silent, looking at her daughter. “Now there is the problem of this young man”— she waved a hand at Rand without taking her eyes off Elayne — “and how and why he came here, and why you claimed guest-right for him to your brother.”

“May I speak, mother?” When Morgase nodded her assent, Elayne told the story simply, from the time she first saw Rand climbing up the slope to the wall. He expected her to finish by proclaiming his innocence. Instead she said, “Mother, often you tell me I must know our people, from the highest to the lowest, but whenever I meet any of them it is with a dozen attendants. How can I come to know anything real or true under such circumstances? In speaking with this young man I have already learned more about the people of the Two Rivers, what kind of people they are, than I ever could from books. It says something that he has come so far and has put on the red, when so many incomers wear the white from fear. Mother, I beg you not to misuse a loyal subject, and one who has taught me much about the people you rule.”

“A loyal subject from the Two Rivers.” Morgase sighed. “My child, you should pay more heed to those books. The Two Rivers has not seen a tax collector in six generations, nor the Queen’s Guards in seven. I daresay they seldom even think to remember they are part of the Realm.” Rand shrugged uncomfortably. *She’s right about that.* The Queen saw him and smiled ruefully at her daughter. “You see, child?”

Elaida Sedai rose from her stool and slowly came down from the dais to stand before him. “From the Two Rivers?” she said after studying him for a moment. She reached a hand toward his head. He pulled away from her touch, and she let her hand drop. “With that red in his hair, and grey eyes? That far west, the people are dark of hair and eye, and they seldom have such height.” Her hand darted out to push back his coat sleeve, exposing lighter skin. “Or such skin.”

“I was born in Emond’s Field,” he said. His thoughts went to his dream—him, a newborn, on a snowy mountain, with a woman who was not his mother— but he pushed them away. “My mother was an outlander; that’s where my eyes come from. My father is Tam al’Thor, a shepherd and farmer. I am the same.”

Elaida Sedai nodded slowly, never taking her eyes from his face. He tried to meet her gaze levelly, despite the sour feeling in his stomach. Still meeting

him eye to eye, she moved her hand slowly toward him again. He resolved not to flinch this time.

It was his sword she touched, not him, her hand closing around the hilt at the very top. Her fingers tightened and her eyes opened wide with surprise. “A shepherd from the Two Rivers,” she said, her voice a soft whisper meant for all, “with a heron-mark sword.”

It was as if she had announced the Dark One. Leather and metal creaked behind Rand, boots scuffling on the marble tiles. From the corner of his eye he could see Tallanvor and another of the guardsmen backing away from him to gain room, hands on their swords, ready to draw. In two quick strides Gareth Bryne was at the front of the dais, between Rand and the Queen. Even Gawyn put himself in front of Elayne, a worried look on his face and a hand on his dagger. Elayne herself looked at Rand as if she were seeing him for the first time. Morgase did not change expression, but her hands tightened on the gilded arms of her throne.

Only Elaida Sedai showed less reaction than the Queen. She gave no sign that she had said anything out of the ordinary. She took her hand from the sword but kept her eyes on his, unruffled, calculating.

“Surely,” Morgase said, her voice level, “he is too young to have earned a heron mark. He cannot be any older than Gawyn.”

“It belongs with him,” Gareth Bryne said.

The Queen looked at him. “How can that be?”

“I do not know,” Bryne said slowly. “He *is* too young, yet still it belongs with him, and he with it. Look at his eyes. Look how he stands, how the sword fits him, and he it. He is too young, but the sword is his.”

When the Captain-General fell silent, Elaida Sedai said, “How did you come by this blade, Rand al’Thor from the Two Rivers?” She said it as if she doubted his name as much as she did where he was from.

“My father gave it to me,” Rand said. “It was his. He thought I’d need a sword, in the outlands. Out in the world, that is.”

“Yet *another* shepherd from the Two Rivers with a heron-mark blade.” Elaida’s smile made his mouth go dry. “When did you arrive in Caemlyn?”

“Today,” he said. He was done telling this woman the truth. She frightened him as much as any darkfriend had. It was time to start hiding again. “This morning.”

“Hmm. Just in time,” she said. “Where are you staying? Do not say you have not found a room somewhere. You look a little tattered, but you have had a chance to freshen. Where?”

“The Crown and Lion.” He remembered passing The Crown and Lion while looking for The Queen’s Blessing. It was on the other side of the New City from Master Gill’s inn. “I have a bed there. In the attic.” He had the feeling that she knew he was lying, but she only nodded.

“What chance this?” she said. “Today the false Dragon is brought into Caemlyn. In two days he will be taken north to Tar Valon, and with him goes the Daughter-Heir for her training. And at just this juncture a young man appears in the Palace gardens, claiming to be a loyal subject from the Two Rivers...”

“I *am* from the Two Rivers.” They were all looking at him, but no one reacted.

“... with a story calculated to entice Elayne and bearing a heron-mark blade. He does not wear an armband or a cockade to proclaim his allegiance, but wrappings that carefully conceal the heron from inquisitive eyes. What chance this, Morgase?”

The Queen motioned the Captain-General to stand aside, and when he did she studied Rand with a troubled look. It was to Elaida Sedai that she spoke, though. “What are you naming him? Darkfriend? One of Logain’s followers?”

“The Dark One stirs in Shayol Ghul. The Shadow lies across the Pattern, and the future is balanced on the point of a pin. This one is dangerous.”

Suddenly Elayne stepped forward and threw herself onto her knees before the throne. “Mother, I beg you not to harm him. He would have left immediately had I not stopped him. He wanted to go. It was I who made him stay. I cannot believe he is a darkfriend.”

Morgase made a soothing gesture toward her daughter, but her eyes remained on Rand. “Is this a Foretelling, Elaida? Are you reading the Pattern? You say it comes on you when you least expect it and goes just as suddenly. If this is a Foretelling, speak the truth clearly. Do not wrap it in mystery until no one can tell if you have said yes or no. Speak plainly. What do you see?”

“This I Foretell,” Elaida Sedai replied, “and swear under the Light that I can say no clearer. From this day Andor marches toward pain and division. The Shadow has yet to darken to its blackest, and I cannot see if the Light will come after. Where the world has wept one tear, it will weep thousands. This I Foretell.”

A pall of silence fell over the room, seeming to smother even the sound of people breathing. Elaida Sedai’s eyes stayed trained on Rand’s. She spoke again, barely moving her lips, so softly that he could only just hear her less than an arm’s length away. “This, too, I Foretell. Pain and division come to the whole world, and this man stands at the heart of it. I obey the Queen,” she whispered, “and speak it clearly.”

Rand felt as if his feet had become rooted in the marble floor. The cold and stiffness of the stone crept up his legs and sent a shiver up his spine, down to the tips of his fingers. No one else could have heard. But he had.

“I’m a shepherd,” he said in a normal voice, for everyone to hear. “From the Two Rivers. A shepherd.”

“The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills,” Elaida Sedai said. *Does that mean she believes me, or that she doesn’t?*

“Lord Gareth,” Morgase said, “I need the advice of my Captain-General.”

Bryne shook his head. “Elaida Sedai says the lad is dangerous, my Queen, and if she could tell more I would say summon the headsman. But all she says is what any of us can see with our own eyes. Myself, I believe the boy is here through mere happenstance, though an ill one for him. To be safe, my Queen, I say clap him in a cell till the Lady Elayne and the Lord Gawyn are well on their way, then let him go. Unless, Aes Sedai, you have more to Foretell concerning him?”

“I have said all that I have read in the Pattern, Captain-General,” Elaida Sedai said. She flashed a cold smile at Rand, a smile that barely bent her lips. “A few weeks imprisoned will not harm him, and it may give me a chance to learn more. Perhaps another Foretelling will come.”

For a time Morgase considered, chin on her fist and elbow on the arm of her throne. Rand still wanted to run, but he stayed rooted to the floor. Finally the Queen spoke.

“Suspicion is smothering Caemlyn, perhaps all of Andor. Fear and black suspicion. Women denounce their neighbors for darkfriends. Men scrawl the Dragon’s Fang on the doors of people they have known all their lives. I will not become part of it.”

“Morgase—” Elaida Sedai began, but the Queen cut her off.

“I will not become part of it. When I took the throne I swore to uphold justice for the high and the low, and I will uphold it even if I am the last in Andor to remember justice. Rand al’Thor, do you swear under the Light that your father, a shepherd in the Two Rivers, gave you this heron-mark blade?”

Rand worked his mouth to get enough moisture to speak. “I do. I mean, I do, my Queen.”

“And you climbed the garden wall simply to gain a look at the false Dragon?”

“Yes, my Queen.”

“Do you mean harm to the throne of Andor, or to my daughter, or my son?”

“I mean no harm to anyone, my Queen. To you and yours least of all.”

“I will give you justice then, Rand al’ Thor,” she said. “I credit your story. You have not the look, but you have the sound of the west in your voice. Besides, your hair and eyes, a heron-mark sword from your shepherd father — these are too preposterous to be lies. And even if a voice whispers to me that the best lie is often that too ridiculous to be taken for one, that voice is not proof. I will uphold the laws I have made. I give you your freedom, Rand al’ Thor, but I suggest you take a care where you trespass in the future. If you are found on the Palace grounds again, it will not go so easily with you.”

“Thank you, my Queen,” he said hoarsely. He could feel Elaida Sedai’s displeasure like a heat on his face.

“Tallanvor,” Morgase said, “escort this— escort my daughter’s guest from the Palace, and show him every courtesy. The rest of you go as well. No, Elaida, you stay. And if you will too, please, Lord Gareth. I must decide what to do about these Whitecloaks in the city.”

Tallanvor and the guardsmen sheathed their swords reluctantly, but Rand knew they were ready to draw again in an instant. Still, he was glad to let the soldiers form their hollow box around him and to follow Tallanvor. To his surprise, Elayne and Gawyn exchanged a few words outside the door, then fell in beside him. Tallanvor was surprised, too. The young officer looked from them back to the doors, closing now.

“My mother,” Elayne said, “ordered him to be escorted from the Palace, Tallanvor. With every courtesy. What are you waiting for?”

He looked longingly at the doors, as though whatever was behind them could solve all his problems. “Nothing, my Lady,” he said, and ordered the escort forward.

Rand didn't even notice as the wonders of the Palace slid by him. He was dazed, snatches of thought spinning by too fast to grasp. *You have not the look. This man stands at the heart of it.*

The escort stopped. He blinked, startled to find himself in the great court at the front of the Palace, standing at the tall, gilded gates, gleaming in the sun. Those gates would not be opened for a single man, certainly not for a trespasser, even if the Daughter-Heir did claim guest-right for him.

Wordlessly Tallanvor unbarred a sally port, a small door set within one gate.

"It is the custom," Elayne said, "to escort guests as far as the gates, but not to watch them go. It is the pleasure of a guest's company that should be remembered, not the sadness of parting."

"Thank you, my Lady," Rand said. He lifted his fingers to his head wound. "For everything. Custom in the Two Rivers is for a guest to bring a small gift. I'm afraid I have nothing. Unless you count my invaluable lessons about Two Rivers folk."

"If I had told Mother I think you are handsome, she certainly would have had you locked in a cell." She flashed a dazzling smile. "Fare you well, Rand al'Thor."

Mouth agape and completely befuddled, he watched her go, a younger version of Morgase's beauty and majesty.

"Do not try to bandy words with her," Gawyn laughed. "She will win every time."

Rand nodded absently, still looking after Elayne thought she was out of sight. He realized Gawyn hadn't left, and turned to look at him for a moment.

"My Lord," Rand said, "when I told you I was from the Two Rivers you were surprised. Don't deny it, I heard it in your voice. And everybody else, the Queen your mother, Lord Gareth, Elaida Sedai, none of them..." His thoughts were racing, hurtling around in his mind. Why did no one believe

he was from the Two Rivers? Was that what his dream was about? Or did his dream even mean anything? Was he born... elsewhere?

Gawyn nodded as if he had expected this question, even if it remained unspoken. Still he hesitated. "Wrap a *shoufa* around your head, Rand, and you would be the image of an Aielman. Odd, since Mother hears western Andor in your voice, as do I. I wish we could have come to know one another, Rand al' Thor. Fare you well."

An Aielman.

Rand stood watching Gawyn walk away until an impatient cough from Tallanvor reminded him where he was. He ducked through the sally port, barely clearing his heels before Tallanvor slammed it behind him. The bars inside slammed into place loudly.

The oval plaza in front of the Palace was empty, now. All the soldiers were gone. All the crowds, trumpets, and drums had vanished, leaving only silence. Nothing left but a scattering of litter blowing across the pavement and a few people hurrying about their business now that the excitement was done. He could not make out if they showed the red or the white.

An Aielman. That's what Loial said, too.

Pulling his cloak close, he broke into a trot, across the plaza and into the streets of the Inner City. The sooner he was out of Elaida Sedai's easy reach, the better. He looked back often to see if anyone was following him, but the sweeping curves of the streets kept him from seeing very far. Still, he fancied he could see, or feel, Elaida Sedai's eyes watching him, tracking him, measuring him.

By the time he reached the gates to the New City, he was running.

Old Friends and New Threats

Rand threw himself against the front doorframe of The Queen's Blessing, feeling weak and gasping for breath. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that the two men showing the white from earlier were still across the way. He didn't care. If anyone had seen him running from the Place to the inn, cloak billowing behind him like a banner in the wind, they surely would have seen that he wore the red, and they could have taken his running as an excuse to chase him. That didn't slow him at all. The way he was running, he didn't think even a fade could have caught him.

"Ho, boy. Welcome back." Lamgwin was one of the dozen or so men Master Gill had hired to prevent any trouble at the inn. He was sitting on a bench by the door, a brindle cat in his arms. When Rand came running up, Lamgwin stood and checked for trouble that might have been following him, calmly scratching behind the cat's ears. "Fools tried to steal some of the cats a while back," he said, sitting back down. He studied his knuckles for a moment before going back to his scratching. "Good money in cats these days."

Lamgwin's eyes flashed to the men across the way. Rand looked at them more closely. One had a black eye and a swollen jaw, and a sour scowl directed at Rand. After the Queen and Elaida Sedai and Tallanvor, Rand found the scowl altogether unimpressive.

"Where's Master Gill?" he asked.

"Library," Lamgwin said. The cat purred, and he grinned. "Ain't nothing bothers a cat for long, not even somebody trying to stick him in a sack."

Rand hurried through the common room, full of men wearing the red and talking over their ale. About the false Dragon, and whether the Whitecloaks would make trouble when he was taken north. Not that they cared what happened to Logain. They were just worried for the Daughter-Heir and Lord Gawyn.

Rand found Master Gill in the library, playing stones with Loial. A plump tabby sat on the table, feet tucked under her, watching their hands move over the cross-hatched board.

Master Gill shook his head as Loial placed another stone with his long fingers. Loial was probably winning. He usually did. When Master Gill saw Rand, he turned away from the game. “There you are, lad. I was beginning to worry. Thought you might’ve had trouble with some of those white-flashing traitors, or run into that beggar or something.”

“The beggar?” Rand said. “Oh yeah, I saw that bundle-of-rags of a man, but that’s nothing. I saw the Queen, too, and Elaida. That’s where the trouble is.”

Master Gill snorted a laugh. “The Queen, eh? You don’t say. We had Gareth Bryne out in the common room an hour or so ago, arm-wrestling the Lord Captain Commander of the Whitecloaks, but the Queen, now... that’s something.”

“Blood and ashes,” Rand said, “why does everybody think I’m lying today?” He tossed his cloak across the back of one chair and threw himself onto another. He sat on the front edge, elbows resting on knees, legs bouncing nervously. “I— Look, I saw the beggar, and he saw me, and I thought... That’s not important. I climbed up on a wall, so I could see the plaza in front of the Palace when they took the false Dragon in. And I saw him, I saw Logain, but then I fell off the wall. I fell into this garden on the other side.”

Master Gill’s skepticism melted slowly as Rand told the story. Before long, the innkeeper was perched on the edge of his chair, just like Rand. Loial

listened impassively, except that every so often he rubbed his broad nose and the tufts on his ears gave a little twitch.

Rand told them everything that had happened, everything except what Elaida Sedai had whispered to him. And what Gawyn had said at the Palace gate. One he did not want to think about; the other he thought had something to do with his blackout dream— and he definitely didn't want to start talking about his dreams.

“Well,” Master Gill said, “there's no more waiting for your friends for you. You will have to leave the city, and fast. Two days at the most. Can you get Mat on his feet in that time, or should I send for Mother Grubb?”

“Two days? Why two days?”

“Two days *at the most*. Elaida is Queen Morgase's advisor, right next to Gareth Bryne himself. Maybe ahead of him. She can set the Queen's Guards looking for you, and if she does, well, the Guards can search every inn in Caemlyn in two days. And that's saying some ill chance doesn't bring them here the first day, or the first hour. Your thing about the Crown and Lion might buy you a little time, but not near enough for dawdling.”

Rand nodded slowly. “If I can't get Mat out of that bed, you send for Mother Grubb. I have a little money left. Maybe enough.”

“I'll take care of Mother Grubb,” the innkeeper said, waving his hand like it was nothing. “And I suppose I can lend you a couple of horses. You'll wear out your boots halfway to Tar Valon, you try walking.”

“You've been right good to us, Master Gill,” Rand said. “It seems like we've brought you nothing but trouble— a poor gift for such a good friend.”

Master Gill shrugged his shoulders and cleared his throat. “Aye, well, Thom's always been a good friend to me. If he's willing to go out of his way for you, I can do a little bit, too.”

“Rand,” Loial said, “I believe I shall go with you when you leave.”

“Wha— Loial, no. That’s a bad idea.” He hesitated— Master Gill still did not know the whole of the danger— then added, “You know what waits for Mat and me, what’s chasing us.”

“Darkfriends,” Loial said, “and trollocs, and Aes Sedai, and who knows what else. Maybe the Dark One. But you are *ta’veren*, I am more convinced than ever, and I think we’re meant to travel together for a spell. Besides, you are going to Tar Valon, and there is a very fine grove there, which I have heard the Aes Sedai tend well. And I have another matter that perhaps the Aes Sedai can help me with.”

Ta’veren. Eladia Sedai’s voice echoed in his head: *This man stands at the heart of it.* Rand didn’t want to be at the heart of anything. But no use taking it out on Loial.

“What other matter?” he asked. “No matter. You can come, Loial. Of course you can. I don’t know why you’d want to, but I should be glad of the company. Mat— well, you know how Mat is.”

“That’s just fine. I— ”

A tap came at the door, and one of the serving maids, Gilda, stuck her head into the room. Her mouth was tight, and her eyes worried. “Master Gill, come quickly, please. There’s Whitecloaks in the common room.”

Master Gill leapt up with an oath, sending the cat jumping from the table to stalk out of the room, tail stiff and offended. “I’ll come. Run tell them I’m coming, then stay out of their way. You hear me, girl? Keep away from them.” Gilda bobbed her head and vanished. “You had best stay here,” he told Loial.

The ogier snorted; it sounded like sheets ripping. “I have no desire for any more meetings with the Children of the Light.”

Master Gill’s eye fell on the stones board and a smile touched his lips. “It looks as if we’ll have to start the game over later.” Loial was definitely winning.

“No need for that.” Loial took a book down from the shelves that was quickly swallowed up in his hands. “We can take up from where the board lies. It is your turn.”

Master Gill grimaced. “If it isn’t one thing, it’s another,” he said under his breath as he hurried from the room.

Rand followed him, but slowly. He had no more desire than Loial to become involved with the Children. *This man stands at the heart of it.* He stopped at the door to the common room. He could see the entire room, but stood far enough back that he hoped he would not be noticed. *Ta’veren.*

Dead silence filled the room. Everyone at the tables was studiously ignoring the five Whitecloaks standing in the middle of the floor. Lamgwin was lounging against the wall by the front door, intently cleaning his fingernails with a splinter. Four more of Master Gill’s guards were spaced across the wall from him, all making a point of paying no attention at all to the Whitecloaks. For their part, the Children were just as intently nonchalant as the patrons and guards. Only one showed any emotion at all, impatiently tapping his steel-backed gauntlets against his palm as he waited for the innkeeper. The silver lightning-flash beneath the sunburst on his cloak seemed to mark him as the leader.

Master Gill crossed the room to him quickly. “The Light illumine you,” he said with a careful bow— not too deep, but not slight enough to be insulting, either— “and our good Queen Morgase. How may I help— ”

“We have no time for your drivel, innkeeper,” the fidgety Whitecloak said. “We’ve been to twenty inns already today, each a worse pigsty than the last, and we’ll see twenty more before the sun sets. We’re looking for darkfriends, a boy from the Two Rivers— ”

Master Gill’s face grew darker with every word. He puffed up as if he would explode, then finally did, cutting the Whitecloak off. “There are no darkfriends in my establishment! Every man here is a good Queen’s man!”

“Yes, and we all know where Morgase stands,” the Whitecloak said, twisting the Queen’s name into a sneer, “she and her Tar Valon witch, don’t we?”

Chair legs scraped loudly against the floor. Suddenly every man in the room was on his feet. They didn’t make a move beyond standing, but every one stared grimly at the Whitecloaks. The leader didn’t seem to notice, but the four behind him looked around uneasily.

“It will go easier with you if you cooperate,” the head Whitecloak said to Master Gill. “The temper of the times goes hard with those who shelter darkfriends. I wouldn’t think an inn with the Dragon’s Fang on its door would get much custom. Might have trouble with fire with that on your door.”

“Your under-officer’s lightning bolt does not impress or intimidate here, boy,” Master Gill said quietly. “Now get out of here, or I’ll send for the Queen’s Guards to cart what’s left of you to the middens.”

Lamgwin’s sword rasped out of its sheath, and the coarse scrape of steel on leather repeated throughout the room as swords and daggers filled hands.

The under-officer looked around in scornful disbelief. “The Dragon’s Fang —”

“Won’t help the five of you,” Master Gill said. He held up a clenched fist and raised his forefinger. “One.”

“You must be mad, threatening the Children of the Light.”

“Whitecloaks hold no writ in Caemlyn. Two.”

“Can you really believe this will end here?”

“Three.”

“We’ ll be back,” the under-officer snapped, and then started hastily turning his men around. His effort to make it seem like they were leaving in good order and in their own due time was in vain, not least because his men scurried for the door at a speed just below running, eager to be outside.

Lamgwin stood across the door with his sword, giving way only at Master Gill’s word. When the Whitecloaks were gone, the innkeeper dropped heavily onto a chair and rubbed a hand across his forehead. All over the room men seated themselves again, laughing over what they had done. Some went over to clap Master Gill on the shoulder.

When he saw Rand, the innkeeper tottered off the chair and over to him. “Who would have thought I had it in me?” he said, sounding dazed. “Well, you’ ll have to stay out of sight until I can get you out of the city.” With a careful look back into the common room, he pushed Rand deeper into the hall. “That lot will be back, or else a few spies wearing red for the day. After that little show, I doubt they’ ll care whether you’ re here or not, but they’ ll act as though you are.”

“That’ s crazy,” Rand said. At the innkeeper’s gesture he lowered his voice. “The Whitecloaks have no reason to be after me.”

“I don’ t know from reasons, lad, but they’ re after you and Mat for certain sure. What have you been up to? Elaida *and* the Whitecloaks?”

Rand raised his hands in protest, then let them fall. He’ d heard the Whitecloak. He didn’ t know why, but they *were* after him and Mat. “What about you?” he asked. “The Whitecloaks will make trouble for you even when they don’ t find us.”

“No worries about that, lad. The Queen’ s Guards still uphold the law, even if they do let traitors strut around showing white. As for the night, well, Lamgwin and his friends might not get much sleep, but I could almost pity anybody who tries to put a mark on my door. Almost.”

Gilda appeared beside them, dropping a curtsy to Master Gill. “Sir, there’ s... there’ s a lady. In the kitchens. The kitchens! She’ s asking for

Master Rand, sir, and Master Mat. By name.”

Master Gill raised an eyebrow at Rand, who could only shrug.

“Lad,” Master Gill said, “if you’ve somehow managed to bring the Lady Elayne down from the Palace to my inn, we’ll all get a kiss from the headsman.” Gilda squeaked at the mention of the Daughter-Heir and gave Rand a round-eyed stare. “Off with you, girl,” the innkeeper said sharply. “And keep quiet about what you’ve heard. It’s nobody’s business.” Gilda bobbed again and darted down the hallway, flashing glances over her shoulder as she went. Master Gill sighed. “In five minutes, she will be telling the other women you’re a prince in disguise. By nightfall it will be all over the New City.”

“Master Gill,” Rand said, “I never mentioned Mat to Elayne. It can’t be—” Suddenly a huge smile lit up his face, and he ran for the kitchens.

“Wait!” the innkeeper called behind him. “Wait until you know. Wait, you fool!”

Rand threw open the door to the kitchens, and there they were. Moiraine Sedai rested her serene eyes on him, unsurprised. Behind her stood Nynaeve and Egwene, and behind them Perrin, and Lan lounging in the doorway leading to the stableyard. Rand ran up and threw his arms around the Aes Sedai without thinking. “You found us,” he said, and his mind flashed to his dream, and Moiraine Sedai nursing him as a babe. He saw Mother’s face as Moiraine Sedai patted him on the back and he stepped back. “I-I-I’m— I’m so sorry. I-I just, I didn’t know if you, that is— ”

“Oh, do shut up,” Egwene said as she and Nynaeve took him in their arms. Perrin crowded in behind him, patting his shoulders as if afraid he might vanish. It was a tangle of arms and laughter complicated by Nynaeve trying to feel his face for fever. They looked a tad worse for wear, but they were alive, and together again. His throat was so tight he felt like he was swallowing his own tongue. “I was afraid I’d never see you again,” he finally managed to say. “I was afraid you were all...”

“I knew you were alive,” Egwene said against his chest. He caught the scent of her hair, but it felt far away, even as she held him close. “I always knew it. Always.”

“I did not,” Nynaeve said, and took a step back. She smiled up at him. “You look well, Rand. Not overfed by any means, but well, give thanks.”

“I guess you know these people after all,” Master Gill said behind him. “These those friends you were looking for?”

“Yes, yes, friends.” Rand made introductions all around. It felt odd to give Lan and Moiraine Sedai their right names, but Master Gill already knew their story. It was pretty easy here to pick out the Aes Sedai and the warder.

The innkeeper greeted everyone with an open smile, but he was properly impressed at meeting a warder, and awestruck at meeting Moiraine Sedai. He gaped openly when Rand presented her, then gave a deep bow. Finally he said, “You are welcome to The Queen’s Blessing, Moiraine Sedai, as my guest. Though I suppose you will be staying at the Palace with Elaida Sedai, and the Aes Sedai who came with the false Dragon.” Bowing again, he gave Rand a quick, worried look.

Rand nodded, tried to tell Master Gill with his eyes that Moiraine Sedai was alright, that she wasn’t like Elaida. She didn’t hide a threat behind every glance, under every word. “*Before I let the Dark One have you, I will destroy you myself.*” Well, not *every* word.

“For the short time I remain in Caemlyn,” Moiraine Sedai said, “I believe I will stay here, and pay for the pleasure. But you must call me Moiraine. We are to be friends, and besides, there is no need to announce my... calling... to all the city. That goes for you, too, children. Wisdom.”

A calico cat sauntered in from the hallway to scratch itself against the innkeeper’s ankles. No sooner had the calico begun than a fuzzy grey sprang from under the table, arching its back and hissing. The calico crouched with a threatening growl, and the grey streaked past Lan into the stableyard.

“Oh, Aes Sed— I mean, Moiraine— I am sorry for these bloody— oh! These cats! I’m sorry. And you see what a madhouse this is. You would do me great honor by being my guest. I’ll hear nothing of payment. That is, if you are sure you wish to stay here. I am sure it is more comfortable at the Palace. But my best room, yes, you shall have my best room. My best room as a gift.”

Moiraine Sed— *Moiraine. That’s going to take some getting used to.*

Moiraine seemed to pay no attention at all to Master Gill’s jumbled chatter. Instead she bent down to scratch the orange-and-white cat; it promptly left the innkeeper’s ankles for hers.

“I have seen four other cats here, so far,” she said. “You have a problem with mice? Rats?”

“Rats, Moiraine S— ” The innkeeper sighed. “Rats. A terrible problem. Not that I don’t keep a clean place, you understand. It’s all the people. The whole city is full of people and rats. But my cats take care of it. You’ll not be troubled, I promise.”

Rand exchanged a fleeting look with Perrin, who put his eyes down right away. There was something odd about Perrin’s eyes. And he was so silent; Perrin was almost always slow to speak, but now he was saying nothing at all.

“With your permission, Master Gill,” Moiraine said, in a voice that assumed she already had it, “it is a simple matter to keep rats away from this street. With luck, the rats will not even realize they are being kept away.”

Master Gill wore a frown, but he bowed and nodded at her offer. “If you are sure you don’t want to stay at the Palace, my Lady.”

“Where is Mat?” Nynaeve asked Rand, then turned to Moiraine. “You said he was here, too.”

“Upstairs,” Rand said. “He hasn’t left the room much since we got here. He’s... not feeling well.”

Nynaeve perked up. “He’s sick? Take me to him. She can deal with the rats, I’ll attend Matrim.”

“All of you go up,” Moiraine said. “I will join you in a few minutes. We are crowding Master Gill’s kitchen, and it would be best if we could all be somewhere quiet for a time.”

“Quiet” means out of sight. We aren’t done hiding just yet.

“Come on,” Rand said. “We’ll go up the back way.”

The Emond’s Field folk crowded after him to the back staircase, leaving the Aes Sedai and the warder in the kitchen with Master Gill. He could not get over being back together. It was nearly as if he were home again. He could not stop grinning. He had never felt so close to these people, or at least not Perrin or the Wisdom. It felt good.

The same relief, almost joyous, seemed to be affecting the others. They chuckled to themselves, and kept reaching out to grip his arm. Perrin’s voice seemed subdued, and he still kept his head down, but he began to talk as they climbed.

“Moiraine said she could find you and Mat, and she did. When we rode into the city, the rest of us couldn’t stop staring— well, not Lan, of course— but this place! All the people, the buildings, everything.” His thick curls swung as he shook his head. “It’s all so *big*. And *so many* people. Some of them kept staring at us, too, shouting ‘Red or white?’”

Egwene touched Rand’s sword, fingering the red wrappings. “What does it mean?”

“Nothing,” he said. “Nothing important. It’s a Caemlyn thing. We’re leaving for Tar Valon, remember?”

Egwene gave him a queer look, but she removed her hand from the sword and took up where Perrin had left off. “Moiraine didn’t look at anything any more than Lan did. She led us back and forth through all those streets so many times, like a dog on a scent, that I thought you couldn’t be here. Then, all of a sudden, she took off down a street, and the next thing I knew we were handing the horses to the stablemen and marching into the kitchen. She never even asked if you were here. Just told a woman who was mixing batter to go tell Rand al’Thor and Mat Cauthon that someone wanted to see them. And there you were”— she grinned— “like a ball popping into the gleeman’s hand out of nowhere.”

“Where is the gleeman?” Perrin asked. “Is he with you?”

Rand’s stomach lurched and the good feeling of the reunion turned empty with one of their party missing. “Thom’s dead. In Whitebridge. There was a fade...” That’s all he could say. Nynaeve shook her head, muttering under her breath.

The silence thickened around them, stifling the little chuckles, flattening the joy, until they reached the head of the stairs.

“Mat’s not sick, exactly,” he said then. “It’s... well, you’ll see.” He swung the door open and stepped inside. “Look who’s here, Mat.”

Mat was still curled up in a ball on the bed, just as Rand had left him. He raised his head to stare at them. “How do you know they’re really who they look like?” he said hoarsely. His face was flushed, the skin tight and slick with sweat. “How do I know *you’re* who *you* look like?”

“Not sick?” Nynaeve looked at Rand like he was mad as she pushed past him, already unslinging her bag from her shoulder.

“Everyone changes,” Mat said in that raspy hiss. “How can I be sure? Perrin? Is that you? You’ve changed, haven’t you?” His laugh sounded more like a cough. “Oh, yes, you’ve changed.”

Perrin dropped onto the edge of the other bed with his head in hands, staring at the floor. Mat's hacking laughter seemed to wound him.

Nynaeve knelt beside Mat's bed and put a hand to his face, pushing up the scarf that nearly covered his eyes. He jerked back from her, his eyes bright and glazed. "You're burning," she said, "but you should not be sweating with this much fever." She kept her voice level, but Rand could still hear the worry. "Boys, go fetch some clean cloths and as much cool water as you can carry. We have to bring your temperature down first, Mat, and—"

"Little Nynaeve," Mat said, his voice almost a sing-song. "A Wisdom ain't supposed to think of herself as a woman, is she? No, not a woman, with a woman's needs. But you do, now, don't you? You can't make yourself forget—you carry a woman's heat between your legs. It frightens you. Yes, everybody changes." Nynaeve's face went whiter with every word he spoke. Mat's laugh was a cackle from the throat of some strange bird Rand had never seen. His feverish eyes slid to Egwene. "Pretty Egwene, so much prettier than Nynaeve. You're a woman now, too, even with your braid out. And you two share other things now, yes? Other dreams. What do you dream about now?" Egwene took a step back from the bed.

"We are safe from the Dark One's eyes for the time being," Moiraine said as she walked into the room with Lan right behind her. Her eyes fell on Mat as she stepped through the doorway, and she hissed as if she had touched a hot stove. "Get away from him!"

Nynaeve did not move except for turning to stare at the Aes Sedai, eyes wide with shock and confusion. In two quick steps Moiraine seized the Wisdom by the shoulders, hauling her across the floor like a sack of grain. Nynaeve struggled and protested, but Moiraine did not release her until she was well away from the bed. The Wisdom continued her protests as she got to her feet, angrily straightening her clothes, but Moiraine ignored her completely. The Aes Sedai watched Mat and Mat alone. She eyed him the way she might a viper in the grass.

"All of you stay away from him," she said. "And be quiet."

Mat stared back as intently as she. He bared his teeth in a silent, snarling rictus, and pulled himself into an ever tighter knot, but he never took his eyes from hers. Slowly she put a hand on him, lightly, on a knee drawn up to his chest. A convulsion shook him at her touch, a shudder of revulsion spasming through his entire body. Suddenly he pulled one hand out, slashing at her face with the ruby-hilted dagger.

One minute Lan was in the doorway, the next he was at the bedside. He didn't even appear to have taken any steps. His hand caught Mat's wrist, stopping the slash as if it had struck stone. Mat stayed in that tight little ball. Only the hand with the dagger tried to move, straining against the warder's unyielding grip. Mat's eyes never left Moiraine, and they burned with hate.

Moiraine did not move, either. She did not flinch from the blade when he first pulled it out, and she did not now that it was quivering inches from her face. "How did he come by this?" she asked. Rand had never heard her voice so tight. Hard like steel. "Did I not specifically say to take nothing from that cursed city? That place of ruin and sorrow? I warned you."

"He didn't— we didn't know," Rand said. "He found it when he was alone in the city, took it from an old armory." Moiraine looked at him, her eyes as hot as Mat's. "I didn't know until after we were separated. I didn't know."

"You did not know." Moiraine studied Mat. "It is a wonder you got so far, carrying this. I felt the evil of it when I laid eyes on him, the touch of Mashadar. It is deep in him, now."

"What's wrong with him?" Egwene asked.

"Is it catching?" Nynaeve said. "I can still treat him. I don't seem to catch sick, no matter what it is."

"Oh, it is catching," Moiraine said, "and your protection would not save you." She pointed to the dagger, careful not to touch it. The blade trembled as Mat strained to reach her with it. "This is from Shadar Logoth. There is not a pebble of that city that is not tainted and dangerous to bring outside the walls, and this is far more than a pebble. The evil that killed Shadar

Logoth is in it. It is in Mat, too, now. Suspicion and hatred so strong that even those closest are seen as enemies, rooted so deep in the bone that eventually the only thought left is to kill. By carrying the dagger beyond the walls of Shadar Logoth he freed it, this seed of it, from what bound it to that place. It will have waxed and waned in him, what he is in his heart fighting the contagion of Mashadar. But now the battle inside him is almost done, and he almost defeated.”

Nynaeve’s face had gone white. “Can you do anything?” she asked, her voice a throaty whisper.

“I hope so. I hope I am not too late.” She dug into the pouch at her belt and came out with the silk-shrouded *angreal* that she had used to heal Father, and in the battle in the Hills of Absher. “Leave me. Stay together, and find somewhere you will not be seen, but leave me. I will do what I can for him.”

A Way Forward

Egwene didn't feel much like talking as they walked back downstairs. It seemed like no one did. Her excitement for this adventure had been muted since the Whitecloaks had taken them. She had never been so afraid for so long— day after day. And she couldn't get the images of what they had done to Perrin out of her mind. Even her enthusiasm for channeling was a bit dimmer since Moiraine Sedai had scolded her about sparking those tent fires in the Whitecloak camp. Now the gleeman was dead, and Mat... Her eyes welled up when she thought of Mat dying. She had never taken him seriously back home, but he was the only one who hadn't fought her about coming along. He was able to find the play and fun even in the scary moments, and she felt a kind of kinship with him.

The back stairwell didn't get much sunlight in the late afternoon, and the lamps hadn't been lit for the evening yet. Sunlight and shadow striped the stairs. She noticed Perrin keeping his face down. He was still ashamed of his eyes, of what they meant.

At least they were all together again. All except the gleeman. So why did things feel so different with Rand? *Why did I say that I always knew they were alive? Where did that lie come from?* She thought about when she was so afraid— so *convinced*— that the others were dead, and found solace in Aram's arms. Blushing, she put her hands in her pockets and her head down and just concentrated on the small, everyday details of her surroundings—the walnut paneled walls, the oak stair railing, the dust motes floating in the dying sunlight.

Rand led them through the back by the kitchens; they were able to avoid the common room altogether, which she was sure would please Moiraine. Rand led them down to a doorway at the end of a hall.

“This is the library,” he said, and opened the door. “Not a lot of people come in here. Not sure how many who stay here even know their letters. I think Master Gill keeps it more for himself, really.”

Rand stepped on ahead, but Egwene stopped just inside the door. So did everyone else. Sitting there by the fire was a creature unlike any she had ever seen. Four legs, two arms, plus it was massive, taller than Rand even, with a strange, broad face and funny tufted ears. It had fur, or something like it, but it was wearing clothes and reading a book, so it was definitely not an animal.

“Ogier,” she and Perrin said at the same time.

Rand turned around. When he saw them all staring at the ogier— it had to be an ogier— he smiled. “Oh yeah. Everybody, this is Loial, son of Arent, son of Halan, an ogier from Stedding Shangtai. You can just call him Loial. Loial, these are my friends I told you about. The ones I’ve been waiting for.”

The ogier, Loial, closed the book he was reading and set it down, then stood to bow formally. Rand introduced them one by one, and Loial seemed to have heard all about them. He knew about Perrin’s blacksmithing, and that Nynaeve was Wisdom.

“Ah, Egwene,” he said when Rand introduced her. “Yes, Rand has spoken of you a great deal. A pleasure. I am Loial.”

“The pleasure is mine, uh, Loial,” she said. *A great deal? What did he say about me?* “I never thought to meet an ogier.”

The ogier smiled at that. “And I never thought to meet so many interesting humans as I have since I left the *stedding*.” He looked at the three of them and turned to Rand. “And the Aes Sedai, Rand?”

“She’s upstairs with Mat.”

One of the ogier’s long eyebrows shot up. “Hrmm. Then he *is* ill. I thought it seemed so. Well, he’s in good hands, yes? I suggest we all be seated. She will be joining us? Good, then there’s nothing to do but wait.”

Egwene took a spot on the long couch next to a small black cat with white feet curled up and half asleep. When she sat down, the cat stood up, stretched, and sat in her lap. She stroked between its ears and smiled when it started purring.

Perrin sat next to her, and was the first to make somewhat normal conversation with the ogier.

“The *stedding*, Loial,” he said. “We passed through one coming to Caemlyn, but only for a night, and it was deserted. Are the *stedding* really havens, the way the stories say?” He looked at Egwene with his sad, yellow eyes. *He is looking for shelter from something inside him. There’s no shelter from yourself.* She reached out and put her hand on his.

Loial was glad to tell about the *stedding*, and how he came to be at The Queen’s Blessing, and what he had seen in his travels. Egwene was fascinated, not just to hear about his travels and his life, but getting a sense of how he thought about things. It was really quite odd. He seemed to think any story needed two or three hundred years of background to be understood. She was astonished to learn he was almost a hundred years old and still not an adult.

Loial had been speaking for a while when the door opened. There was Mat, standing, blinking, with his coat buttoned up and a dark scarf wrapped low around his forehead. Moiraine stood behind him with her hand on his shoulder, and Lan behind them. Moiraine was watching Mat carefully, as one watches someone getting out of a sickbed for the first time. As always, Lan watched everything while appearing to watch nothing.

Mat looked as if he had never been sick at all. His first, hesitant smile included everyone, though it slipped into an openmouthed stare at the sight

of Loial. *Maybe they haven't met? Rand did say Mat hasn't really left the room.* With a shrug and a shake, Mat turned his attention back to the rest of them. "I... ah... that is..." He took a deep breath. "It— it seems I've been acting sort of, ah, dodgy lately. I don't remember much of it, really." He looked at Moiraine uneasily. She smiled back confidently and squeezed his shoulder. He turned to Rand. "Everything is hazy after, oh, maybe Carysford? Maybe a little before. Don't really remember getting to Caemlyn at all, nor nothing after that. And, well, Moiraine Sedai says I... upstairs, I... ah..." Then he grinned that Mat Cauthon grin, looking like he would after pulling a prank on Ewal Coplin. "Well, you can't hold a body to blame for what he does when he's mad, can you?"

"You've *always* been mad," Perrin said, and smiled. He hadn't smiled much since the Whitecloaks took them.

"No," Nynaeve said. Tears made her eyes bright, but she was smiling. "No one here blames you."

Egwene scooted the cat over to Perrin, got off the couch, and took a couple of steps toward Mat. She smiled awkwardly at him and then wrapped him in a hug. "Don't you go dying on me, Cauthon," she said in his ear. "None of these other buggers is any fun."

Mat laughed at that, then gave Rand an awkward hug and sat down.

"I can't believe how well you look, Mat," Rand said. "You have no idea how good it is to see you up and about."

"Well, Matrim," Nynaeve said with a smile, "I hope having such a hard trick played on you will cure you of the mischief in your heart."

"I ain't never gotten into a lick of mischief, Wisdom," Mat said, eyes wide and innocent. "I wish I knew what you were talking about, I do."

That had everyone laughing.

Egwene said, "This is amazing, Moiraine S— Moiraine."

“Well, the job is not yet done,” Moiraine said. “He still has the dagger. I cannot take it from him without killing him. The binding has lasted too long and grown too strong. That must be unknotted in Tar Valon. It is beyond me, or any lone Aes Sedai, even with an *angreal*.”

“But he don’t look sick anymore,” Perrin said.

“I cleansed the taint from him, and did what I could to slow its return, but return it will, in time. Unless he receives help in Tar Valon.”

“Excellent, then, that that is our destination,” Loial said with a big-toothed smile.

Moiraine looked up at the ogier.

Loial bowed deeply. “I am Loial, son of Arent, son of Halan, Aes Sedai.”

“Hello, Loial, son of Arent,” Moiraine said. “I am Moiraine. It is a pleasant surprise to find you here. It seems few ogier leave the *stedding* anymore.”

“I had a special and unexpected friendship with a human that drew me Outside. I’ve been visiting the groves. I have a Talent for Treesinging, you see. A scrap of that Talent, at any rate, though it is almost completely lost. The groves are mostly gone now, though. But it has been good to see those old cities that remain standing. If buildings are a poor substitute for trees, they are still worth seeing. Not many think so, but perhaps when I return and tell them what I’ve seen, they will change their minds. I hope so. In time.”

“Perhaps they will,” Moiraine said. “And you say you are heading to Tar Valon after Caemlyn?”

“He’s coming with us,” Rand said. “He’s— I promised him he could.”

Moiraine stood looking at the ogier quietly. After a moment Egwene thought she might not have heard Rand, but finally she nodded. “The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills,” she said. She moved to the fireplace, and when

she turned back to the room every eye was on her. Slight of build as she was, her presence dominated. Egwene wanted very much to learn how she did that. “We cannot remain long in Caemlyn, nor are we safe here in The Queen’s Blessing. The Dark One’s eyes are already in the city. They have not found what they are searching for, or they would not still be looking. That we have to our advantage. I have set wards to keep them away, and by the time the Dark One realizes that there is a part of the city the rats no longer enter, we will be gone. Any ward that will turn a man aside, though, would be as good as a beacon fire for the myrddraal, and the Children of the Light are in Caemlyn, also, looking for Perrin and Egwene.”

“For—” Rand started. Moiraine raised an eyebrow at him. “I just—I thought they were looking for me and Mat.”

Moiraine now raised both eyebrows. “Why would you think the Whitecloaks were looking for you?”

“I— Earlier tonight I heard one say they were looking for someone from the Two Rivers. In the common room. Darkfriends, he said. What else was I supposed to think? We’re the only Two Rivers boys around here. Or we were. I guess I thought Elaida might’ve—”

“Elaida?” Moiraine cut in. “What has Elaida Sedai to do with this?” Her eyes were like lances pinning Rand in place.

“Sh-sh-she wanted to throw me in prison.” He spoke slowly at first, but the words came faster and faster and soon he was babbling. “All I wanted was a look at Logain, but she wouldn’t believe I was in the Palace gardens by chance, not with Elayne and Gawyn, and them about to leave for Tar Valon and all, she wouldn’t believe it. But Queen Morgase let me go. No proof, she said. No proof I meant any harm, and she was going to uphold the law, the laws that she made, and she didn’t want any part of the suspicion smothering Caemlyn. And she let me go.” He paused then, and everyone stared at him as if he had sprouted wing and taken flight. All except Loial, who looked like he’d heard this already, and Moiraine, who tapped her finger on her pursed lips as she considered him. When no one said anything,

Rand went on. “Can you imagine— me meeting a Queen? She’s beautiful, you know, like the queens in stories. So is Elayne. And Gawyn, he was really quite nice, even to a shepherd like me.” Everyone was still staring. “Blood and ashes, I just climbed up on the wall for a look at the false Dragon. I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“That’s what I always say,” Mat said with his wolfish grin. “No one ever believes me.”

“Wh-who’s Elayne?” Egwene asked. *Don’t be jealous, fool girl. You’ve no claim on him. Besides, you’ve had your own adventures since you last saw each other.*

“If Elaida Sedai is looking for you,” Moiraine said, “then time is even shorter than I thought. Two powerful parties hunt within the New City for us. Outside, trollocs and fades are massing. Lan tells me that there are already enough to watch all the ways out of the city— a dozen fists, at least — and more on the way. When the fades have big enough numbers, they will storm the city looking for us. To do so may draw half the armies on this side of the Spine of the World north to the Borderlands, but the Dark One’s forces seem to think that an acceptable risk.”

“Another Trolloc War,” Loial said in a hushed voice.

“Not quite yet,” Moiraine said. “If we can find a way out of Caemlyn, the halfmen will have no more interest here.”

“Yes, if. But getting out will be difficult,” Lan said. “We are not a small party, and we must assume the fades have eyes on every gate. Trollocs are built for the night. We should go now, while we still have some light, scant as it might be.”

“Even if we leave right at this moment,” Rand asked, “what are the chances we actually get past these thousand or more trollocs camped just outside the city?”

“Better than they’ll be when another five fists get here,” said Lan.

“Uh, Moiraine Sedai,” Loial said. Everyone looked at the ogier. “I may have a solution.”

Moiraine looked at him for a moment. “Please,” she said.

“Well, as I said, I had an unexpected friendship with a human. I have told Rand some of this, but not all. Not the part I am sharing now. About five years ago, a man came to Stedding Shangtai. He looked to be an ordinary man, but he was ill. He stayed in the *stedding* for a while, trying to get well, and we became good friends. But he was a very odd man. Erratic. At first, I just attributed that to his being human.” Loial paused. “I am sorry. I did not mean to say...I’m sorry.”

“It is alright, Loial,” Moiraine said. “Compared to ogier, humans are indeed erratic, and rash, and excitable. Please continue.”

“Thank you, Aes Sedai. Micah was ill, and he was not getting better. Eventually we learned that he was a channeler, and that the taint on *saidin* was killing him.” Egwene was not the only one who gasped then. “I was devastated. Human lives are so short, and his was getting cut shorter still. Much shorter. He was safe in the *stedding*, but he couldn’t stay. Unable to sense the True Source, he was only becoming less stable. He couldn’t stand it. I imagine it was not unlike the Longing. Finally, he decided he needed to leave the *stedding*, to go back Outside. I walked with him to see him off, and that’s when my journey began. When he crossed over from the *stedding* to Outside, he had a Foretelling. He said:

When the dragon wakes, the eye he opens will be the Eye of the World.

When they parade the impostor, you will go through the dark to find the very thing.

Where the pattern twists and turns, in the place without up or down, the path to the eagles’ home will lead to the prize that has long been lost.

It is not in the stedding, but in the groves that your journey begins.

“At the time, I knew only what the last part meant— that I must go see the groves as I’ve done in my daydreams decade after decade. But now I fear I know what the third part of the Foretelling means. ‘Where the pattern twists and turns, in the place without up or down, the path to the eagles’ home will lead to the prize that has long been lost.’ I believe we must go through the Ways, back to Manetheren.”

“Wait,” Egwene said. “The Eye of the World? Perrin, that’s from the story the Tinkers told us. The Aiel story.”

Perrin hung his head in his hands. Moiraine turned hers slowly toward Egwene. “What story?” she asked.

“Some Tinkers crossing the Waste— I guess they can do that unharmed— found some Aiel dying after a battle with trollocs,” said Perrin. “A band of women warriors. They have those, the Aiel do. These women were all dead or dying, and the last one, before she died she told the Tinkers what they had learned in their battle— the Dark One, they called him Sightburner, means to seize the Eye of the World, and to slay the dragon before it hatches. She asked, ‘What happens if the Eye opens and sees nothing but Sightburner?’ This was three years ago, not five. Does it mean something?”

“Perhaps everything,” Moiraine said, her hands steeped before her face. Her face was still, but Egwene knew her mind was racing behind those dark eyes.

“Væ’ alza,” Mat said softly. The strange word drew everyone’s eyes to Mat sitting there in the wooden chair. “The Eye of the World. It ain’t just from a Tinker story. It’s from our dreams.” He looked at Rand. “I’ve forgotten a lot, but I remember that. Don’t you remember? We have to tell her.”

“Perrin,” Egwene said, “wasn’t there something about a dream of yours and the Eye of the World?”

Perrin looked like he remembered but didn't want to.

"It's important now," Rand said. "We can't keep it secret any longer."

Perrin nodded.

"Keep what secret?" Moiraine's voice was as harsh as Egwene had ever heard it. Her eyes darted between Perrin and Mat and Rand.

"I've—" Rand started, then looked to Perrin and Mat, who both nodded before he went on. "We have had dreams." He rubbed the spot on his finger where the thorn had pricked him once, remembering the blood when he woke. "Except maybe they weren't dreams, exactly. Væ'alza was in them. It said— well, it said all sorts of things, but once it said the Eye of the World would consume me before it would serve me. Maybe more than once."

"Told me the same thing," Perrin said, and Mat nodded.

"You aren't angry with us?" Rand asked. He sounded tentative, afraid of the answer. Egwene didn't think Moiraine seemed angry. She was studying them intently, but her eyes were clear and calm.

"More with myself than you. But I did ask you to tell me if you had strange dreams. In the beginning, I asked. Had I known after the first such, I might have been able to... Tar Valon has not had a Dreamwalker for nearly a thousand years, but I could have tried. I would not have known yet what to make of the Eye of the World, but I would have been able to offer some modicum of protection. But every time the Dark One touches you, the next touching becomes easier. Perhaps my presence can still shield you somewhat, but even then... You shall have to defend yourselves. I cannot give you the strength and will. You must find them within."

Egwene looked at them, all three of them. The Dark One was in their dreams. In their heads. *Maybe...maybe I shouldn't have come. Maybe I should have let them take their problems far away from me and Emond's Field.* It was a low thought, and she hated herself as soon as she thought it.

It was the closest she'd come to regretting inviting herself along on this journey.

"I reckon I've already found *my* protection," Perrin said, but he didn't sound pleased about it.

"Yes," Moiraine said, "I suppose you have." She turned to the others. "The Dark One's power has limits inside you. It is true that if you yield, even for an instant, it can tie a string to your heart, a string you may never be able to cut. But deny it, and its power fails. It is not easy when it touches your dreams, but it can be done. If you can keep your strength there, then Lan and I can take care of halfmen and trollocs and draghkar in the waking world. What else did the Dark One say to you?"

"I can't remember it all that well," Perrin said. "There was something about one of us being chosen. Something like that. I remember it laughing about —" Perrin stopped and looked at the other two boys, then back at Moiraine. His eyes fell to the floor. "It was laughing about who chose us. Said it was the White Tower."

"Yeah," Rand said, "and then it said I— we could serve it or die. And even then we'd still serve it."

"They are all three *ta'veeren*," Loial said suddenly. Egwene didn't know what that meant, but it seemed to brighten the ogier's mood.

"They may well be," Moiraine said, nodding. "Yes, three of them, when I expected one. A great many things have happened that I did not expect. Most importantly this news that the Dark One is hunting for the Eye of the World. That changes everything." She paused, frowning. "The story of the Eye of the World is mostly lost. But I have seen fragments about it in the old histories. Some say it is only a myth, but I believe the Eye is an object of great power, of the One Power— a relic of the years right after the Breaking. No one knows exactly what it does or why it was made. But the Foretelling that Loial shared with us—

When the dragon wakes, the eye he opens will be the Eye of the World.

“I have read all of the Karaethon Cycle, and everything else I have found on the Dragon and the Dragon Reborn. I doubt more than a handful of my sisters has read more on the Eye of the World than I. All those texts, and this is the first I have ever heard of a connection between the two. The only reasonable interpretation is that opening or using the Eye of the World will be one of the early signs that the Dragon has been reborn, perhaps the first.”

Egwene felt her heart sink into her belly. *The Dragon Reborn?* No one wanted to live to see Lews Therin Telamon return to bring a new Breaking.

“If it finds the Eye of the World first, the Dragon Reborn will have to face the Dark One early, when he is still vulnerable. The Eye will be the irresistible bait for a trap that could doom the world.

“This is a crucial time, and— at least for now— the Pattern seems to be swirling around you three boys, just as Loial says. I daresay that swirl will grow greater before it abates. Sometimes being *ta'veren* means the Pattern is forced to bend to you, and sometimes it means the Wheel forces you to the needed path. As we find ourselves forced at this very moment.

“We cannot remain in Caemlyn, for we are hunted within the city walls. We cannot leave Caemlyn because, by any road, halfmen and trollocs will be on us before we have gone ten miles. And just at this point we learn of a Foretelling that seems to point a way out of here and toward the Eye of the World.

Where the pattern twists and turns, in the place without up or down, the path to the eagles' home will lead to the prize that has long been lost.

“‘Where the pattern twists and turns.’ That is around you three boys. Three *ta'veren*— ones who force the Pattern around themselves. The place without up or down must be the Ways, where time and space and direction and gravity do not work as they do in our world. And where else would the

eagles' home be but Manetheren, home to the Red Eagle? *Carai an Caldazar*. And what has been lost longer than the Eye of the World, made just after the Breaking?

“The Wheel is forcing us into the Ways, and now. We cannot even spare the time to stop in Tar Valon for help. We cannot risk the halfmen and trollocs outracing us to the Eye.” She turned to Loial. “There was an ogier grove here at Caemlyn, and a Waygate. The New City now spreads out over where the grove once stood, so the Waygate must be inside the walls. I know not many learn the Ways now, but you have studied the old texts for the Songs of Growing. Your Talent must have made you curious, even if you thought you would never use such knowledge. Maybe you even brushed up on what you had read when preparing to travel Outside. Do you know the Ways, Loial? Can you get us to Manetheren?”

“I can, Aes Sedai,” Loial said slowly, “and I agree with your reasoning. There is only one problem. If we enter the Ways, we will all die— or be swallowed by the Shadow.”

Book Four: The Eye of the World

Woven Together

“Is that the only problem?” Mat said. “Surprised you thought it worth mentioning.”

“What do you mean, Loial?” asked Egwene. “What *are* the Ways?”

“Probably shouldn’t distract us with such petty concerns,” Mat said.

The ogier glanced at Moiraine. She gave him a small nod as she took a seat in a chair in front of the fireplace. “The knowledge is yours, Loial, as is the telling.”

“Well, if we mean to talk about it, I suppose I vote we not die,” said Mat. “Or be swallowed by the Shadow. I vote we do something else entirely.”

“Matrim!” the Wisdom said.

“What? Maybe ogier are more easily troubled by such trifles. I don’t know. Ain’t never met one before.”

Perrin punched him lightly on the arm, and Mat looked around for sympathy. He didn’t find much, but Egwene gave him a wink.

“It was during the Time of Madness, while the world was still being broken and the earth was in upheaval.” Loial fidgeted as he began. Mat had never seen anyone so large fidget. Well, he had never seen anyone so large *at all*. The ogier seemed to take up half the room, and when he squirmed this way and that, it made Mat feel squirmy, too. *The ogier has a case of the fidgets, and it’s catching.* “Humankind was scattered like dust on the wind, and we

were, too— the ogier, driven from the *stedding*, into the Exile and the Long Wandering. It was then that the Longing was graven on our hearts. But this is a story of those few ogier who held in their *stedding* while the world crumbled around them. Of them, and of the Aes Sedai, the male Aes Sedai who were dying even as they destroyed the world in their madness. It was to those Aes Sedai— those who yet held on to their wits and their will— that the *stedding* first made the offer of sanctuary. Many accepted, for in the *stedding* they were cut off from the True Source, protected from the taint on *saidin* that was killing their kind. But in the end, being unable even to sense the True Source, much less touch it, was a loss they could not bear. One by one, every Aes Sedai left the *stedding*, hoping that the taint had run its course, that *saidin* was clean again. It never was.”

“Some in Tar Valon,” Moiraine said quietly, “claim that ogier sanctuary prolonged the Breaking and made it worse. Others say that if all of those men had been allowed to go mad at once, there would have been nothing left of the world. I hold to the second view, Loial. Sanctuary helped to save what could be saved. Fear no judgment here.”

Loial nodded, looking relieved.

“Before the male Aes Sedai left, they gave a gift to the ogier in thanks for the sanctuary. A marvelous gift. The Ways. The Ways are not part of the world we see around us. They might not be a part of *any* world, outside of themselves. You can enter a Waygate, walk for a day, and depart through another Waygate a hundred miles from where you started. Five hundred. Time and distance are strange there. Different paths, different bridges, lead to different places, and how long it takes to arrive depends on which path you take. As wondrous a gift as that would be now, it was even more so during the Time of Madness, for there was no Breaking in the Ways. At a time when at any moment new canyons might open up, or new mountains might rise, or new wars might erupt, cutting one *stedding* off from another, ogier could travel by the Ways, where there was no change. The Ways meant safe travel at a time when no travel was safe.

“When the last Aes Sedai left the *stedding*, they gave to the Elders a key, a talisman, that could be used to grow the Ways to connect new places here in this world. Soon the Ways connected all the known *stedding* to one another. As the Exile ended and we found *stedding* that had been lost, we grew a new Waygate at each. When we built human cities, we grew beautiful groves to give us comfort while we were away from the *stedding*, to stave off the Longing. The groves, they were connected, too. There was an ogier grove here in Caemlyn, but it has long since been plowed under and paved. The Waygate stands, though, as they all do. No destroying a Waygate.”

“How did they make them?” Egwene asked. “The Aes Sedai, the men. If they couldn’t use the One Power in a *stedding*, how could they make the Ways? Or did they use the Power at all? Their part of the True Source was tainted. *Is* tainted. I don’t know much about what Aes Sedai can do. Maybe it’s a silly question.”

Mat shivered. He was getting more accustomed to seeing a woman channel, but the idea of a man doing the same still made him feel sick inside.

“Far from silly,” Loial said. “Those men did indeed use tainted *saidin* to make the Ways, which is why each *stedding*’s Waygate is just outside its border, where one can still touch the True Source. But that taint has left the Ways so corrupted that no ogier has used them in my lifetime, and before. It began about a thousand years ago, during your War of the Hundred Years. Slowly— so slowly that, at first, no one noticed— the Ways grew dank and dim. Then darkness fell along the bridges. Some who went in were never seen again. Travelers spoke of being watched from the dark. The numbers who vanished grew, and some who came out had gone mad, raving about *Machin Shin*, the Black Wind. Aes Sedai Healers aided some, but more were beyond any help, and even those the Aes Sedai brought back from madness were never the same. It was as if the darkness had sunken into their bones. They never laughed again, and they feared the sound of the wind.” The ogier paused. His tufted ears twitched twice before he went on. “That’s why the Elders have forbidden travel by the Ways.”

For a moment, the only sounds were the cat purring beside Moiraine's chair and the crackle of the fire. "You must be mad to think we'll follow you into that," Nynaeve finally said. She was speaking to Moiraine, and her voice burned low and hot like white coals. "You play with these children's lives like tokens in a feastday game. We didn't need these Ways to get here, we don't need them to get back home."

"It might be that you could get to the Two Rivers or it might not," Moiraine said, her voice low and cool, "but how would you get *out* of Caemlyn? Or have you forgotten the Whitecloaks within the city and the shadowspawn without? It is precisely because I value all of your lives that I stand behind Loial's suggestion that we enter the Ways."

The Wisdom didn't so much as peep, but Mat could almost feel the heat from the blood rushing to her neck and her cheeks.

"I myself would not enter the Ways," Loial said. "I would not break the Elders' edict, nor risk *Machin Shin*. But the Pattern puts walls up at every turn, until it seems we are forced to walk through the Caemlyn Waygate."

"I agree," Moiraine said. "The edict is sound. But the prospect of the Eye of the World falling into the Dark One's hands presents a far more perilous menace than anything the Elders hope to protect us from."

"Aye, but what can we possibly do?" Mat said. He wished the lamps in the room were lit. Evening was creeping over Caemlyn, and the fire in the hearth gave little light. The room was falling into shadow. "Why are *we* so bloody important?"

"You are important because the Pattern has chosen you." Moiraine did not raise her voice, but it filled the room just the same. "Three threads have come together here, each giving a warning about the Eye. It is too much to be chance. It is the Pattern setting our path. You three did not choose; you were chosen. There is nowhere to hide from the Pattern. There is no way to outrun the future. But you *can* shape it. In fact, you *will*. Step aside and you may doom the world. Find the Eye and you may save it. Three *ta'veren* with an object of great power, Foretold to be a part of the Dragon's rebirth?

Yes, stand there and let the Pattern weave itself around you, and you may very well save the world. But the choice is yours. I cannot make you go.”

“I’ll go,” Perrin said. He seemed every bit the man who knew he could not outrun the Wheel— weary and resigned, his eyes cast down. In fact, Perrin hadn’t looked Mat in the eye since he’d come down. When he heard al’ Thor agree to go, too, Mat felt he had little choice and did the same.

“I suppose Egwene and I have no more say in this than the boys,” Nynaeve said.

Moiraine nodded. “You are part of the Pattern, too, both of you, in some fashion. Perhaps not *ta’veren*— perhaps— but strong even so. I have known it since Baerlon. And no doubt by this time the fades know it, too. And Væ’alza. Yet you, too, can choose. You could remain here, proceed to Tar Valon once the rest of us have gone. Even go back to the Two Rivers over land, maybe meet the boys there.”

“Stay behind?!” Egwene’s lip twisted in scorn for the idea. “What, we should hide under the bed skirts while you all dice with death to save the world? Not a hand pie’s chance in a fat man’s kitchen. I won’t do it.”

“I suppose that means we both will accompany you,” said Nynaeve.

“And I will guide you,” the ogier said with a sigh. “I’m no *ta’veren*, but it seems the Pattern pushes me, as well.”

“Our choices are made, then,” said Moiraine. “And now that we have decided *what* to do, we must decide *how* to do it.”

Long into the night they planned. Moiraine did most of it, with Loial’s advice concerning the Ways, but she listened to questions and suggestions from everyone. Once dark fell Lan joined them, adding his comments in that voice of frozen gravel. The Wisdom made a list of supplies they needed, seeming to have a secret exchange with the inkwell, hunched over and muttering a stream of words that Mat could barely hear.

Mat had little to add to the conversation. He had no special knowledge or talent that could help the group. *Blood and ashes, I don't even remember getting to this city.* He just paced up and down while the others mapped out their plans. *Black Wind. A darkness that sinks into your bones.* Al' Thor was clutching the arms of his chair so tightly that his knuckles were white. Mat looked down at his own hands and was surprised to find one sneaking in under his coat, reaching for the dagger. He cleared his throat and walked over to sit next to al' Thor.

"Well met," said Mat.

"Well met, Mat," al' Thor said. "I'm glad you're feeling better."

"Aye, thanks. I guess I am. I don't really remember being sick."

"Must be odd."

"Maybe when we get home," Mat said, "we'll be done with odd for a while." He didn't quite believe that, but he hoped. He'd had his fill of adventure.

"Maybe. But we still need to get you to Tar Valon. And home..." Al' Thor looked toward the fire where Egwene was sitting. "Well, I don't reckon it'll be quite the home we remember. Even if everything in Emond's Field is back to normal, I think *we're* changed, all of us."

"Aye, I suppose so." Mat paused. When al' Thor didn't say anything, he took a deep breath and went on. "Listen, the last few days, I don't remember much—"

"Probably best. They weren't your happiest days."

"Right—I don't remember much, but I remember Four Kings, and I remember right after."

Al' Thor was quiet for a moment. "Yeah," he finally said.

“Yeah. So I just, I remember, and I ain’t gonna forget. I’d like as not be dead without you. I’m— Well, thank you, is all. I know I ain’t always been the friendliest with you. For true, I thought you were an odd duck. I mean, I still do. You still are. But odd or no, I’ll be on your side when the line is drawn, just like you were on mine. You’re alright by me, al’ Thor. I mean, Rand. You’re alright by me, Rand.”

For a long minute Rand al’ Thor didn’t say anything, staring at Mat with his mouth hanging slightly open. Finally he just nodded and grabbed Mat’s forearm. Mat grabbed his back, and Rand said, “I’d do it again.” And Mat believed him.



Egwene sat in a wicker chair by the fire, looking out on the rest of the room. She had a tabby tomcat in her lap and was idly scratching between his ears. Loial was huddled with Moiraine and Lan, while Nynaeve reviewed the notes she was making.

Egwene was doing nothing save trying not to be afraid, or at least not to let her fear control her. The boys were just as idle as she. Perrin sat near the window, looking out into the dark stableyard. At this angle she could see the firelight swimming in those yellow eyes. *He* didn’t look afraid. He just looked... *done*. On the other side of the room, Rand and Mat were having a quiet conversation. Egwene smiled. She didn’t often see those two together. These past weeks must have brought them closer. No wonder. She and Perrin had certainly formed a deeper bond since Shadar Logoth.

Mat and Rand stood up. Mat walked over to Perrin, and Rand to her. She flashed him a smile, and he smiled weakly back.

“Hello,” she said.

“Hello,” he said. “Staying warm?” He knelt down and scratched the bridge of the tomcat’s nose.

“Aye. But for the chill on my heart. These Ways sound beastly.”

“They do at that.” He sat down on the floor, cross legged and facing the fire. He looked up at her. “What happened out there, Gwennie? You’ve heard about me and Mat, some of it anyway. But you and the others—you saw Tinkers? Were you all together the whole time? And what happened to Perrin? His eyes are... are they yellow? And he doesn’t seem to have any spirit left at all.”

She took a deep breath. “What happened out there? A lot. Quite a lot happened. We— Perrin and I, that is— well, most of it is his story to tell, really. But we did see Tinkers. Spent a few days with them. Spent a few days with Whitecloaks, too, but not by choice. It wasn’t until a couple of days ago that we saw the others, Moiraine Sedai and Lan and Nynaeve. They rescued us from the Whitecloaks. Then we made for Caemlyn.”

“Rescued you? You mean they held you captive?”

She heard Perrin screaming. She saw the blood running down his back and sides. She saw his body hanging limp, waiting for the next lash. She smelled the lightning in the air on the night of their rescue. She felt the One Power flowing through her as she set those tents aflame in vengeance for what they did to Perrin. And she felt the loneliness of captivity, the hunger for someone to hold her and let her cry, to kiss her eyes and stroke her hair till she fell asleep.

“Captive and worse,” she said. She opened her mouth expecting to say more, but found that she had said all she wanted to.

Rand was silent. “Egwene,” he said when she didn’t offer anything more, “You shouldn’t come with us tomorrow. It’s me the Dark One’s after, me, and Mat, and Perrin. Forget what Moiraine Sedai said. You *can* choose. Go home, or to Tar Valon. There’s nothing here for you. Nothing but more death and pain and blood.”

“Don’t play the fool, Rand al’ Thor,” she said softly, smiling. “You know we can’t. We’re part of this, Nynaeve and I. Moiraine Sedai told us what Min saw in Baerlon.”

“You know Min?”

“We met. We danced.” Egwene thought of the kiss Min had given her and her cheeks went hot. “I didn’t know who she was, what she does, till Moiraine told us yesterday. So it seems the Pattern sends me to the Eye of the World, too. Whatever involves you, involves me.”

“But, Egwene—”

“It’s decided, Rand. Leave it be. Besides, we’re going home. Isn’t that what you wanted?”

They looked at each other for a long moment. Egwene half felt like taking him in her arms— she realized now just how much she had missed him— and half felt like running as fast as she could. But she had nowhere to run, and this wasn’t the time or place for the other. She glanced at Moiraine— she was the only person who knew anything about her and Rand— but the Aes Sedai was wrapped up in the planning with Loial and Lan. She brought her eyes back to Rand, and the silence between them stretched until it became positively awkward. She was about to say something, anything, just to break it, when Master Gill clattered through the door.

The innkeeper came with light for the lamps and food for their bellies— some bread, cheese, and mutton, along with peas and onions. At home it would have been a scant offering, but it was better than Egwene had eaten in weeks. She had to force herself to slow down more than once.

They were still eating when Master Gill came back to report on the goings-on outside. Whitecloaks were watching the inn from down the street in both directions. A riot had broken out at the gates to the Inner City, with the Queen’s Guards arresting white cockades and red alike. Someone had tried to scratch the Dragon’s Fang on the front door, but Lamgwin’s boot had sent him on his way. None of it seemed to concern them directly.

Egwene continued to notice the deference Moiraine Sedai commanded without ever asking for it. Master Gill came back several times, and each time he knocked at the door and waited till Lan opened it for him, just as if it were not his inn and his library. He answered the few questions Moiraine put to him without trying to discover what they were planning. He always asked if she needed anything of him before he left, and always sounded earnest. On his last visit, Moiraine gave him the sheet of parchment covered in Nynaeve's neat hand.

"It won't be easy this time of night," he said, shaking his head as he looked over the list, "but I'll arrange it all."

Moiraine added a small wash-leather bag that clinked as she handed it to him by the drawstrings. "Good. And see that we are wakened before daybreak. The watchers will be at their least alert then."

"We'll leave them watching an empty box, Aes Sedai." Master Gill grinned.

Egwene was yawning by the time they all shuffled out of the room in search of baths and beds. The bath was her first since Baerlon, and it was absolute bliss. Nynaeve and Moiraine washed quickly and went to bed, but Egwene stayed behind. Several times she refreshed the bath with hot water, hoping to soak out every knot and every worry. As her muscles relaxed, her hands found their way between her legs, and her thoughts drifted to Rand, and Aram, and the desperate hope that human touch could ward off the lonesomeness of the outlands.



It was pitch-black when Mat and Rand finally got up to their room under the eaves. Mat got undressed and crawled into bed, tucking the dagger under his pillow for safekeeping. Moiraine Sedai had said he needed to keep the dagger until he got to Tar Valon, and he aimed to do just that.

From the first he knew it was a dream, one of those dreams that was not entirely a dream. He was back in the Winespring Inn, in the common room. It was familiar, but he knew it wasn't where he was in the waking world. He closed his eyes and concentrated on The Queen's Blessing, on his bed, on Rand across the room snoring softly, on himself asleep with his dagger under his pillow. But when he opened his eyes, he was still in the empty common room of the Winespring Inn. He paced restlessly to and fro, waiting for the man he knew would be appearing.

On a table near the cold hearth stood three small figures, each in the shape of a man, rough and featureless as though the sculptor had been hasty with his clay. Beside one stood a wolf, its clear detail a stark contrast to the crude man-shape. Another clutched a sword, with those little birds like the ones on al'Thor's. The last one held a tiny dagger, a point of red on the hilt glittering in the light. Mat picked up the one with the dagger.

"So that's who you are."

Mat looked up with a start. Across the table sat Væ'alza in his familiar white linen and plum scarf. He looked the same as ever, except that instead of flickering in and out of flame, his eyes now blazed constantly. Mat looked back at the figurine; it now had Mat's face, carved in exquisite detail. In fact, it looked like flesh, and Mat fancied he could feel his own hand holding him, like he was the figurine. He put it back down and stepped back from the table.

"You've hidden from me for too long, my friend. Too long, but not much longer."

"I-I-I deny you," Mat said hoarsely. "I deny that you, that you hold any power over me. Any power here. I deny you."

Væ'alza laughed, a rich sound rolling from fire. "Did someone tell you that would work? That those three words form an incantation of Power that would banish me from this dreamscape? It really is a shame what passes for Aes Sedai these days. And a shame you could believe them. You are greater

than whoever is giving you counsel. And I am greater still. There is no denying that.”

“I deny you. Deny you!”

“You always do, in the beginning.” Væ’alza picked up the figure of Mat and ran his finger along its edge as he leaned back in his chair. “Each time we begin this, you have a different face, and a different name, but that is always the same.”

“I deny you?” Mat’s voice was just a desperate whisper now.

“Each time you throw your strength against me, and each time, in the end, you know me for your better. Age after Age, you join me, or die wishing you had. Poor boy, let’s not do this. You can never win against me, but you don’t have to be against me at all. Come now. The hour grows late.”

“Liar. Lies. Th-they found you in the last Age, in the Age of Legends, found you and bound you.”

“The last Age? Is that all you can wrap your head around? This struggle has gone on since before *creation*, my friend. Men always think it is a new war, but it is just the same war discovered anew. But now, now change blows on the winds of time. Change! No drifting back this time. No more repetition, chained like slaves to that hateful Wheel.

“But these Aes Sedai who think to stand you up against me, they will yet wear chains.” He put the figure back on the table. “My friends I shall reward, but my enemies I shall punish without mercy. All these so-called Aes Sedai will answer, all save those who already serve me. They will stand but a step beneath me. You can stand with them— *above* them. I offer it one more time, one last time. Stand with me again, as you have before. Know your own power. Know true freedom— freedom from your Creator’s Wheel, freedom from time.”

Lies. Deny the Dark One. Deny it. Mat stepped back, his mind fumbling about for something to deny. “No... no Aes Sedai serve you. Another lie.

Lie.”

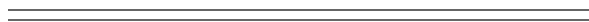
“Is that what they told you? When the trollocs swarmed all the land trying to free it from Tar Valon’s yoke, I found among the Aes Sedai those who saw the truth, who knew your Creator’s work was flawed. For two thousand years, what you call the Black Ajah has dwelt among the others, unseen in the shadows. Perhaps even those who help you now are of that order.”

His head swimming with doubt— doubt about himself, about Moiraine, about what she wanted with him and what she planned for him— Mat took another step back and fell into an unseen chair behind him. *Deny it. Deny it!*

“You have no power here,” Mat said, shaking his head as if to free it from his doubts. He looked back at the figurine with his face. He saw the red sparkle on the hilt of the blade, and thought of the dagger under his pillow. “You have no power. I deny you.” He focused on the dagger, on the realness of it, on the feel of it at his side, in his hand. “I deny you.” He stood back up. In his mind he saw the ruby of his dagger flickering in the flames of Væ’alza’s eyes. “You have no power here.” He took one step forward, then another. “I deny you.” He kicked over the table, then smashed the three figurines with the heel of his boot. Væ’alza never flinched, and Mat was now just a couple of feet from him, with no table in between.

“Very well, boy,” the man said with a sigh. “I do hope you change your mind.” He stood up slowly, then thrust his arm forward suddenly, striking Mat in the chest with the heel of his hand. The blow was powerful and unexpected; Mat staggered backward and tumbled over the chair he had been sitting on. He fell to the floor and felt a splinter stab his hand and his head hit the base of the hearth.

Mat’s head was swimming as Væ’alza stepped into his field of vision. “Time grows short,” the other man said, towering over him. It was the last thing Mat heard before he blacked out.



Rand sat up with a strangled grunt, feeling like he was buried alive, trying to force his way back to the surface. The room was dark and quiet.

Frantically he tried to center on the flame, to shovel fear into it, but the calm of the void eluded him. *A single flame. Concentrate. Feed everything to the flame. Empty. Become empty.* Tremors ran down his arms and legs, but he held the image of the single flame until the blood stopped pounding in his ears.

Mat was across the room, tossing and twisting on his bed. "...deny you... deny you... you... you ain't got..." He trailed off into a series of wordless moans.

Rand stretched out to shake him awake. At the first touch Mat sat up and stared around wildly, then drew a long, shuddering breath and dropped his head into his hands. He twisted around, digging under his pillow, then sank back clutching the ruby-hilted dagger in both hands on his chest. He turned his head to look at Rand, his face hidden in shadow. "It's back, al' Thor. It's back."

"I know."

"There were these figures, three of them, and—"

"I saw them, too."

"It knows who I am, Rand. I picked up the one with the dagger, and it said, 'So that's who you are.' And when I looked again, the figure had my face. My face!"

Rand was silent for a moment, remembering his own dream. "I denied it, again and again. It just laughed."

"Yeah, and said we were in some eternal war. Said we'd met like that a thousand times or more. Blood and ashes, the Dark One knows me."

"It said the same thing to me. But I don't think it does," Rand said, thinking. "I don't think it knows which of us..." *Which of us what?* "...

which of us it wants.”

Mat moved to sit up, then winced in pain. He made his way to the table and lit the candle, though it took him three tries. Rand got up to see what he was doing. Mat had his hand spread open, scratching or pinching the palm of his hand. After a minute he stopped and held his forefinger and thumb up high, pinched tight together.

“Splinter,” he said. He looked at Rand. “From the dream.” He dropped it, then gasped when the splinter vanished as soon as it left his fingers.

Blood started coming out of the hole the splinter left behind. Rand looked around and grabbed the case from the pillow on his bed. Mat washed his hands, then Rand helped him wrap his hand in the pillowcase.

Someone knocked on the door, and Rand jumped. Mat gave him a worried look. Another knock. “Yes?” he said.

Moiraine put her head into the room. “Good, you are awake already. Dress quickly and come down. We must be away before first light.”

“Now?” Mat groaned. “We ain’t even had an hour’s sleep yet.”

“An hour?” she said. “You have had four. Now hurry, we do not have much time.”

Rand shared a confused look with Mat. He remembered every second of the dream clearly. It had started as soon as he closed his eyes, and lasted only minutes.

Moiraine noticed something in their faces. “What has happened?” she asked, stepping fully into the room. “The dreams?”

“It knows who I am,” Mat said. “The Dark One knows my face.” He held up his hand wordlessly, palm up. Even in the shadowed light from the one candle the blood was plain.

The Aes Sedai stepped forward and grasped his upheld hand, her thumb across his palm covering the wound. Rand fancied he felt a chill in his bones as she worked her Healing on Mat. He felt better when she took her fingers away. Mat rubbed a thin smear of blood away, but the wound was gone.

“Hurry,” Moiraine said softly. “Time grows short.”

Time grows short.

Into the Dark

Nynaeve didn't mind the early hour of the day. She grew up in farmland, after all. But being up early back home didn't feel like sneaking around, and didn't attract judging eyes whenever you crossed someone else's path. Here, though, the cook and her helpers seemed to wear jurors' faces, straightening and staring as she and Egwene followed Lan silently through the kitchen and out into the stableyard. It was fine for them to be up—the kitchen was already brightly lit and hot with preparations for breakfast—but respectable patrons should be in bed. At least, that's what Nynaeve got from those eyes.

Lan didn't even glance at the inn staff. He walked straight through, and Nynaeve lowered her head and tried to do the same. Outside, the night was still pitch black. She followed Lan blindly, trusting his instincts to get them across the yard without someone breaking a leg.

The stable seemed to appear from nowhere, suddenly looming over them until the stable door creaked open, letting out a narrow stream of light that gave depth and perspective to their surroundings. Master Gill stood at the door, making sure it never opened wider than it needed to for each of them to go in one at a time. When Egwene was through, the innkeeper closed the door swiftly. Nynaeve blinked in the sudden light inside.

Unlike the kitchen, no one here was surprised to see them. The horses were saddled and waiting. In addition to Clover and the rest, she saw that they had a bulky packhorse with wicker panniers. She also saw two riding horses she didn't recognize wearing saddles, a bay and a dun. *Mat and Rand must have lost their horses at Shadar Logoth.* As if responding to her own thoughts, the door opened and in walked all three boys with Moiraine at

their head. The ogier stepped in behind them. *We're traveling with an ogier.* As strange as the past few weeks had been, apparently some things would still take some getting used to.

Nynaeve noticed that there was no horse for the ogier, which she supposed made sense. What horse could hold him? The innkeeper showed the boys which horses were theirs— the bay for Rand, the dun for Mat— while she and Egwene went straight for their mares. Perrin was stroking the nose of the mare Nynaeve had nicked from the Whitecloaks, murmuring softly in her ear.

“Home,” Nynaeve said softly to Egwene. “I can scarce believe it.”

“I know.” Egwene gave Bela some attention, then looked at Nynaeve. “Is it still home? I wonder if we can live the quiet Two Rivers life after seeing what we’ve seen, learning what we’ve learned. Knowing, you and I, what we can do, what we *could* do if we tried. If we trained.”

It was a sign that either the girl had gained some wisdom, or the Wisdom herself was being foolish. Whichever it was, Egwene’s words seemed an echo of Nynaeve’s thoughts. The difference was that Egwene was afraid of losing the outlands. Nynaeve was afraid she’d already lost the Two Rivers. *I suppose I’ll find out soon enough. If we survive these Ways.*

Master Gill was conferring with the head groom, a man with skin like leather and a face like one of his horses. They traded a few quiet sentences, before the groom knuckled his forehead and hurried to the back of the stable. The innkeeper turned to Moiraine, his round face smiling. “Ramey says the way is clear, Aes Sedai.”

Ramey and another stableman cleared the hayforks, rakes, and shovels from the racks along the rear wall of the stable. Then they reached behind the racks and fiddled with something Nynaeve couldn’t see. Suddenly a section of the wall swung inward on hinges so well hidden that she wasn’t sure she could find them even with the secret door standing open. Light from the stable showed a brick wall only a few feet past the opening.

“It’s just a narrow run between the buildings,” the innkeeper said, “but nobody outside this stable knows this way into it. Ain’t a Whitecloak or white cockade will be watching to see you come out.”

Moiraine nodded. “Remember, Master Gill, if you fear any trouble from this, write to Sheriam Sedai, of the Blue Ajah, in Tar Valon, and she will help. I fear my sisters and I have a good deal to put right already for those who have helped me.”

The innkeeper laughed— not a nervous laugh, but a hearty one. “Why, Aes Sedai, you’ve already given me the only inn in all of Caemlyn without any rats. What more could I ask for? I’ll double my custom on that alone.” His grin faded. “Whatever you’re up to, the Queen holds with Tar Valon, and I hold with the Queen, so I wish you well. The Light illumine you, Aes Sedai. The Light illumine you all.”

“The Light illumine you, also, Master Gill,” Moiraine replied with a bow of her head. “But if the Light is to shine on any of us, we must be quick.” She turned to Loial. “Are you ready?”

The ogier shifted a bit right, then a bit left. Nynaeve noticed he had a pack on his back, more like a knapsack than a saddle and saddlebags. It had two straps, one looping under each foreleg, rather than a single strap across his chest. It had no saddle, of course; it was meant to carry Loial’s belongings, not a rider. The ogier stepped to the back of the stable and paused. Ramey looked impatient, hopping from one foot to the other, but Loial just cocked his head and closed his eyes. “This way,” he said after a moment, and turned down the narrow alley.

Moiraine was first to follow. Mat went next, then Rand, who was taking the first turn leading the packhorse. Nynaeve and Egwene made the middle of the column, with Perrin behind them, and Lan bringing up the rear. The hidden door swung shut as soon as Mandarb stepped into the dirt alleyway. The *snick-snick* of latches locking announced that they were on their own again. *Only with an ogier this time.*

It was, as Master Gill had said, quite a narrow space, and even darker than the stableyard, if that was possible. With tall, blank walls of brick or wood on either side, the sky was but a narrow strip of black overhead. It was almost too narrow for the packhorse, whose panniers scraped against the walls to the left and right. The big woven baskets bulged with supplies, mostly clay jars filled with oil. A bundle of poles was lashed lengthwise down the horse's back, and each had a lantern swinging at the end of it. Loial said the Ways were darker than the darkest night.

The ogier didn't pause when the run let out into a street. In fact, since pausing at the secret doorway in Master Gill's stable, every step he took seemed more decisive than the last. It was as if the route he needed to follow was becoming clearer. Nynaeve turned to Egwene. "How does he know where to go?" she asked in a whisper. In the predawn quiet, it felt like anything louder would bring the Whitecloaks down on them. "How does he know where the Waygate is?"

"I don't know," Egwene said, also whispering. "Perrin asked him, and he tried to answer, but then he gave up. Said it was like trying to explain how to breathe. He said he just knew. He could feel it."

As they hurried up the street, Nynaeve looked back toward The Queen's Blessing. Any Whitecloaks or white cockades would be focused on the inn, but she knew any noise would draw their eyes. Between the horseshoes ringing on the paving stones and the lanterns clattering together on their bunched poles, Nynaeve didn't stop looking over her shoulder until they had turned two more corners.

Loial's internal compass took them down broad avenues, empty save for an occasional dog skulking in the dark; it took them down alleys as narrow as the stable run, where foul-smelling things squished under an unwary step. Bit by bit, the near-black faded to a dark grey. Before long, faint glimmers of dawn pearly the sky above the eastern rooftops. A few people appeared on the streets, heads down, bundled up against the early cold.

It was only when dawn was in full blush that a few people noticed Loial, half again as tall as an average man and with twice as many legs. Luckily, those people scurried off, more frightened than curious, and Nynaeve and the rest were left to make their way to the gate that only the ogier could find.

“There,” Loial said, stopping suddenly and pointing at a two-storey brick building. “It’s under there.” It was some sort of shop, still closed for the night. The tables out front were bare; the awnings were rolled up tight; the door was shuttered. The windows above, where the shopkeeper lived, were still dark.

“*Under?*” Mat said. “How can we—?”

Moiraine raised a hand that cut him off, and motioned for them to follow her into the alley beside the shop. Horses and people together, they crowded the opening between the two buildings. Shaded by the walls, it almost seemed like night again.

“There must be a cellar door,” Moiraine said. “Ah, yes.”

From nowhere, an apple-sized ball of light appeared over her palm, suspended from nothing, moving as she moved her hand. Nynaeve turned to make sure no one could see, but their bodies blocked the entrance to the alley completely. *A fine thing, that none of us so much as draws a deep breath at the sight of a woman channeling the Power.* A wave of nausea passed over her as her thoughts turned to herself, and the secret Moiraine had revealed to her. The Aes Sedai brought the ball of light close to the doors she had found. They slanted almost flat to the ground. An iron lock—bigger than Nynaeve’s hand and thick with old rust—held the heavy hasp shut.

Loial tugged gently at the lock. “I can pull it off, hasp and all, but the noise will wake the whole neighborhood.”

“Let us not damage the goodman’s property if we can avoid it.” Moiraine studied the lock intently for a moment. Then she knocked on the iron with

her knuckle and the lock fell open neatly.

She pulled it from the hasp, and Loial swung the doors up and open, propping them back. A ramp led down into the cellar, and Moiraine wasted no time in leading them down it, her glowing ball showing the way. Aldieb stepped delicately behind her.

“Light the lanterns and come down,” she called softly. “There is plenty of room. Hurry. It will be light out soon.”

Rand and Perrin untied the poles with the lanterns from the packhorse and handed them around. They lit them quickly, though it felt odd as the dark was fading quickly, and Nynaeve could see everyone’s features clearly. *Dawn is dwindling and day takes its place. Soon the street will be filled with people.* If those in the street didn’t wonder at the alleyway crammed full of horses, the shopkeeper surely would. Once the lanterns were lit, they went one by one into the cellar. Clover didn’t like the ramp, but she didn’t make a fuss, either. Right behind her was Lan bringing up the rear, and as soon as he had Mandarb down the ramp he climbed back to pull the doors shut.

The cellar was one big room, as long and as wide as the building above, though the ceiling was low enough that the ogier’s head brushed up against it. The thick layer of dust everywhere told the same story as the rusted lock on the door: no one had been down here in years. The motes they kicked up sparkled in the lantern light.

“Blood and ashes,” Mat said, “why would they build one of these gates in a place like this?”

“It was not always like this,” Loial said. Nynaeve heard in his voice a pain and sadness, a loss that stretched back generations. “Not always. Trees stood here once. Every kind of tree that would grow in this place, every kind that ogier could coax to grow here. The Great Trees, a hundred spans high. Shade of branch, and cool breezes to catch the smell of leaf and flower and hold the memory of the peace of the *stedding*. All that, murdered. And for what?” He looked around at the disused room, empty

save for a few broken barrels filled with odds and ends, and the dust coating everything.

“What is already woven cannot be undone,” Moiraine said gently. She put a hand on his shoulder. “But with your help, perhaps we can keep the groves that still stand from falling under the Shadow. You have brought us to what we seek.”

She stepped to one of the cellar walls, which Nynaeve now saw was different than the others. Surrounded by walls of ordinary brick, this one was intricately worked stone, fanciful swirls of leaves and vines, pale even under its coat of dust. The brick and mortar were old, but something about the stone said it was standing there long before the brick was fired. Later builders, themselves centuries gone, had built around what already stood, and still later men had made it part of this cellar.

One part of the carved stone wall, right in the center, was more elaborate than the rest. Worked in hard stone, the leaves seemed soft, caught in one frozen moment as a gentle summer breeze stirred them. For all of its tender subtlety, that section of the wall had the feel of age, much older than the carved stone that surrounded it. Old, delicate, and undamaged all at once. It was beautiful.

“*Avendesora*,” Moiraine said, almost too softly to hear, and placed her hand on one of the leaves in the stonework. Looking at the wall closely, Nynaeve saw that it was the only leaf of its kind— three leaflets, each bulging out from the stem then tapering to a point. The edges had teeth like a saw, and each of those teeth had smaller teeth of its own.

“The leaf of the Tree of Life is the key,” the Aes Sedai said, and the leaf came away in her hand. Though the wall seemed to be carved of a single piece of stone, and the leaf no less a part of it than any other, she took the leaf from where it had been and set it a hand lower. The leaf fit there as if the space had been intended for it, and as soon as it was in place, the entire nature of the stonework changed.

Nynaeve's breath caught, and she was not alone. The leaves quavered in an unseen, impossible breeze. Then, so slowly that at first it seemed a trick of the eyes, a split opened up in the middle of the ancient carving, widening as the two halves slowly swung into the cellar until they stood straight out. The backs of the gates looked like the fronts, with the same profusion of vines and leaves, stone that was almost alive. Beyond the gate was not dirt or the cellar of the next building, but a dull, reflective shimmering that whispered faint reflections of their images.

"I have heard," Loial said, "that once the Waygates shone like mirrors, and on the other side one walked through the sun and under the sky. Once."

"We have no time for waiting," Moiraine said. "Or for mourning."

Lan went past her, leading Mandarb, poled lantern in hand. His shadowy reflection approached him, leading a shadowy horse. Man and reflection seemed to step into each other at the shimmering surface, and both were gone. For a moment the black stallion balked, an apparently continuous rein connecting him to the dim shape of his own image. The rein tightened, and the warhorse, too, vanished.

For a minute everyone in the cellar stood staring at the Waygate.

"Hurry," Moiraine said. "I must be the last through. We cannot leave this open for anyone to find by chance. Hurry."

Loial was the first to follow Lan, then Perrin. Rand took a step forward, but Egwene cut him off and ran through the Waygate. *Oh, Egwene. Always something to prove.* Rand went next, then Mat. Nynaeve exchanged a look with Moiraine, then led Clover to the gate. She pushed her lantern pole into its reflection, the two merging until both were gone. She made herself keep walking forward, watching the pole disappear into itself inch by inch, and then she was stepping into herself. Her mouth fell open. Something icy slid along her skin, as if she were passing through a sheet of cold water. Time stretched out. The cold enveloped her one hair at a time; it shivered over her clothes thread by thread.

Then she was through the sheet of water. The chill burst like a bubble and she gasped. Just ahead, everyone was bunched together with their horses. All around them was blackness that seemed to stretch on forever. Even with half a dozen lanterns, they had only a small pool of light around them— too small, as if the Ways just swallowed the light.

Clover followed on Nynaeve's heels, and Egwene came forward to meet her.

"Look," she said, and pointed back to the Waygate.

Nynaeve expected to see the same dull shimmer she had seen on the other side. Instead she could see into the cellar, as if through a large piece of smoked glass set in the blackness. Everything around it was completely dark, so that the gateway seemed to float in the middle of nothing.

"Loial says you could walk all the way around it and never see a thing from the other side," Egwene said. "He said don't do it, though." Nynaeve didn't ask why not. She didn't care. The counsel was enough to convince her. This black nowhere did not call out to be explored.

When she reached the others, she saw that they felt what she felt. The darkness here had a density, a heaviness that sagged their shoulders like a heavy load strapped to one's back. Not Lan's shoulders, though. The warder stood straight as ever.

Nynaeve looked back toward the cellar. She saw Moiraine clearly through the smoky dimness, but the Aes Sedai moved as if in a dream. Every movement, even the blink of an eye, seemed a deliberate, exaggerated gesture.

"The Wheel turns faster in the Ways," the ogier said.

Moiraine's hand crept as it found an *Avendesora* leaf on the inside of the Waygate, identical to the one she had moved to open the Waygate. On this side, it was low in the carving, in the same place she had placed it on the

other. Plucking it free, she put it a hand higher, where the one on the cellar side had been originally.

“This is a really bad idea,” Loial said.

“It was your idea,” Mat said. “I was there.”

“That doesn’t make it a good one. I’ve never been in the Ways before, but I’ve seen ogier who have. Even the memory is...unsettling.”

As the large stone gates began to swing slowly inward, Moiraine and her mare crossed into the Ways and regained normal speed. She didn’t shiver or gasp, or signal that she felt anything at all while passing from the cellar to the Ways, but Nynaeve was not fooled. She remembered the cold sheet of water. Behind the Aes Sedai, the window into the cellar narrowed, then closed. Now only their feeble lanterns kept the blackness from swallowing them whole.

Egwene took Nynaeve’s hand. Nynaeve gave a squeeze. “Let’s go home,” she said.

If Lan or Moiraine needed any such reassurance, they didn’t let on as they swung into their saddles. “Loial,” Moiraine said, “we must be on our way.”

“Yes,” Loial said with a nod. “Yes, Aes Sedai, you are right. Not a minute longer than need be.” He pointed to a broad strip of white running under their feet. The floor looked as though it had been smooth once, but now the stone was pitted and the white line was broken in several places. “This leads from the Waygate to the first Guiding. From there, we shall see.”

Nynaeve and the others mounted their horses, and the ogier started forward, following the white line through the dark. Moiraine and Lan flanked him left and right, and the Emond’s Fielders crowded in behind as close as they could get. The light from their lanterns should have been bright enough to fill a house, but it stretched no more than ten feet before the blackness smothered it completely. Even the creak of saddles and the click of horseshoes on stone seemed to die at the border between dark and light.

Nothing changed as they walked. Muffled sounds, bobbing lanterns, pockmarked floor, and broken white line— every step was the same. Nynaeve wrapped her fingers in Clover's mane, just to feel something alive. Even the air felt dead in here, and she felt half dead to be breathing it.

Finally they came upon something different— the broad white line reached its end at the base of a tall slab of stone standing on end. Sinuous curves of metal inlaid the wide surface, graceful lines vaguely reminiscent of vines and leaves. Discolored pocks marked stone and metal alike.

“Our first Island,” Loial said, “and our first Guiding.” He leaned close to frown at the cursive metal inlays.

“Ogier script,” Moiraine said, “but so broken I can barely make out what it says.”

“I hardly can, either,” Loial said, “but enough to know we go this way.” He turned aside from the Guiding.

The lantern light reached just far enough to show that the Guiding sat near the center of a round surface— an Island, the ogier had called it— ringed by a series of stone-walled bridges arcing off into the darkness and gently sloping ramps, without railings of any kind, leading up and down. Between the bridges and the ramps ran a chest-high balustrade, as though falling from the Island was a concern but falling from the ramps was not. The railing was made of plain white stone, simple curves and rounds fitted together in complex patterns.

At the foot of each bridge was a narrow stone column. Loial walked over to one, paused to read the single line of script on column, and nodded. “This is the first bridge of our path,” he said over his shoulder, then started across.

The horses' hooves made a gritty sound, and Nynaeve imagined bits of stone flaking off at every step. Shallow holes covered everything she saw. Most were no larger than the tip of her pinky, but some were more like rough-edged craters up to a stride across. The guardwall showed cracks and

holes, too. In places it was gone altogether for as much as a span. *All the stone here looks sick. Like it's rotting.*

Eventually the bridge ended in a place that looked no different from its beginning. Another Island— were they like flat-topped hills, connected by these bridges and ramps?— with another script-covered Guiding seemingly at or near its center. The ogier read, then took them up one of the ramps, curving up and up. Nynaeve tried not to think of what would happen if one of them fell off the ramp.

After a long climb, curving continuously, the ramp let off onto another Island just like the one where it had begun. Nynaeve's gut told her that they had circled round and were now directly above the last Island, but that couldn't be. What would be holding this one up, then?

Loial consulted yet another slab filled with ogier script, found yet another signpost column, led them onto yet another bridge. At this point, Nynaeve could no more point back to the Waygate than she could point to Emond's Field. She had no idea where they were, where they were headed, or how to get out of here.

Every bridge looked the same, except that some had breaks in the guardwalls and some did not. Every Island was identical, except that some Guidings were more damaged than others. Some bridges she rode alone. Some she spent alongside one or another of the children, or even the Aes Sedai. On one ramp, Rand told her everything he'd learned about Caemlyn in his time there. She spent more than one passage talking idly with Egwene about the women back home, wondering what they might be up to in their absence. It was the same for everyone, cycling through conversation partners as they went from Island to Island. She noticed Egwene speaking at length with Mat, and Moiraine learning all she could from Rand about their time separated from the group. The ogier and the warder had several serious-looking talks. These conversations helped pass the time, but after a while even they began to bleed together. It was not just the bridges or Islands that were identical; every moment was the same as the next. In fact, it all felt like one long moment. Nynaeve lost all sense of time and space.

But somewhere deep down, her body still measured the passing hours, for she noticed quite suddenly that she was hungry.

They were paused on an Island as Loial scrutinized the latest Guiding, Moiraine right at his side. Nynaeve headed toward where Lan stood alone, a few feet from the ogier and the Aes Sedai.

“Lan— ” she began.

“I’m sorry, Wisdom,” he said. “Just a moment. It is midday.” Then he dismounted and began to parcel out bread and cheese and dried meat from the packhorse. Nynaeve couldn’t help but smile. *It’s as if he listens to my body better than I do.* She gasped at her own thought and felt the fire of her blood rushing to her cheeks.

A couple of the others started to climb down from their saddles, but Moiraine stopped them as she rejoined the circle. “Time is too valuable in the Ways to waste,” she said. “For us, much too valuable. We will stop when it is time to sleep.” Lan was already back on Mandarb, and Loial was waiting at the foot of the next bridge.

Nynaeve didn’t care much for the thought of sleeping in the Ways. It was always night there, but not the kind of night for sleeping. It was not a hard thought to set aside, though, as it took all of her concentration to juggle her food, the lantern pole, and her reins, but soon she licked the last crumbs of bread and cheese off her hands. Some food in her belly did wonders for her mood— after all, she hadn’t had so much as a hunk of bread since dinner in Caemlyn the night before— and soon even the weight of the blackness seemed more tolerable. All in all, the Ways were not near so bad as the ogier had made them out to be. They might have the heavy feel of the hour before a storm, but nothing changed. Nothing happened. The Ways were almost boring.

A startled grunt from Loial interrupted Nynaeve’s thoughts. She shared a look with Egwene, then stood in her stirrups to peer past the ogier. She swallowed hard at what she saw. Only a few feet ahead of them, the bridge they were on ended in a jagged gap. Beyond that lay nothing.

What Follows in Shadow

The light of their lanterns stretched just far enough to touch the other side, reaching out from the dark like a child for a plate of honeycakes just out of reach. The jagged stone on either side of the gap put Perrin in mind of a giant wolf opening its maw to the sky. He edged his mare closer to the break and she kicked a loose stone into the dead black below. If it ever struck bottom, Perrin never heard it.

He dipped his lantern pole into the darkness below, but the light died without hitting any wall or floor; it was as dark and empty below as it was above. And he could see that the same emptiness was all that held up the far side of the bridge. The stone was maybe five feet thick with absolutely nothing underneath. And he knew at that moment that the same nothingness supported his side of the bridge, and the stone beneath his feet felt as thin as paper.

Perrin backed the mare away from the edge, where the void seemed to be pulling at his mind and body like a giant lodestone. He ended up side-by-side with the Wisdom, who herself was gazing down into the darkness.

“All the risk, all the pain, all the manipulations— is it to this you’ve brought us, Aes Sedai?” Nynaeve’s voice was sharp and frozen. “All this just to find out we have to go back to Caemlyn after all?”

“No, Wisdom,” Moiraine said. “not back. Not all the way to Caemlyn, anyway. In the Ways, there are many paths to every place. We need only go back far enough for Loial to find another path that will lead to Manetheren. Loial? Loial!”

It was only with visible effort that the ogier was able to pull himself away from the edge. “I— I had not dreamt the decay had gone so far. If the bridges themselves are breaking... Aes Sedai, I may not be able to find the path you want, or even a path back. The bridges could be falling behind us even now.” His eyes drifted back to the chasm, and his ears twitched.

Perrin got a restless feeling in his knees and ankles. He felt like running, but not away. He wanted something to chase. To hunt.

“It will be as the Wheel weaves,” Moiraine Sedai said, “but I do not believe the decay is as fast as you fear. Look at the stone, Loial. Even I can tell that this is an old break.”

Loial looked. “Yes,” he said slowly. “Yes, Aes Sedai. I can see it. There is no rain or wind here, but that stone has been in the air for ten years, at least.” He nodded and flashed a grin. “Good. Manetheren, then.” He turned around and headed back to the Island.

“Moiraine Sedai,” Egwene said, “how are we going to know where to find the Eye of the World? We’re supposed to find it in the Ways, but we can’t see anything and aren’t sure where we’re going, with broken bridges and whatever else. How will we know?”

“Sometimes, Egwene,” the Aes Sedai said, “we must trust that the next turn of the Wheel will bring us closer to our destination. At the moment, all we can do is keep our eyes open and our wits sharp as we make for Manetheren.”

When they got back to the Island, Loial pored over the Guiding intently. Perrin didn’t know whether he was reading aloud or thinking aloud, but he started talking softly to himself as he examined the ancient ogier script. The strong inflections of the ogier tongue made Loial sound like a chorus of deep-voiced birds singing.

The rest got off their horses while Loial tried to work out which way to go next. Moiraine and Lan stood to the side talking softly to each other. Nynaeve and Egwene did the same, and the three boys bunched together by

default. Mat looked at Perrin and Perrin looked away. *Looking at my eyes.* He wanted to hide his eyes— his face— from the world, or from the Ways. *No wonder the Dark One pursues us. No wonder the Whitecloaks hated me. I have some foulness in me.* As much as Perrin had missed Mat in the weeks since Shadar Logoth, he found himself avoiding his friend's company, trying to hide the mark of the darkness inside of him.

“This way,” the ogier said, his resonant voice not ringing at all in the suffocating emptiness of the Ways. He started for the chosen bridge even as the others were mounting their horses.

Perrin hurried ahead, avoiding eye contact with Mat and Rand. “The *stedding*,” he said when he reached Loial. “We’re going to Emond’s Field, so you’ll see where I’m from. Where we’re from. Maybe, when this is over, you could show me the *stedding*.” *Maybe the wolves will let me be in the stedding.* He looked around at the nothing. “No Ways, though. We can walk, or ride, if it takes all summer.”

“That would please me greatly, Perrin Aybara,” Loial said. “I think I shall make a point of trying to reintroduce the *stedding* and the ogier to humans. We cannot live for long periods away from the *stedding*, and everything is further without the Ways, but we have grown too much into strangers even so.” Now it was the ogier who looked at the dark surrounding them, and at the Aes Sedai trailing behind. “Do you really believe it will ever be over?”

Perrin frowned. He thought of Elyas— running with the pack, his beard long and grey, older than Lan. Elyas and the wolves, that would never be over. Would it be the same for Perrin? “Maybe. I hope so. Once we get to the Two Rivers, to Manetheren...”

“Maybe,” the ogier said. “But it feels as if our path forward has been set, and there is no going back. Not really.”

The bridges and ramps led up and down and across. Sometimes a white line ran off into the dark from the Guiding, just like the line they had followed from the Waygate in Caemlyn. Perrin’s were not the only eyes that followed those lines more than a little longingly. At the other end of each of them

was a door back into the world, back to sky and sun and wind. Even the cold and biting breath of the Caladaice would have been welcome. He missed the smell of the wind.

Perrin was the strongest and sturdiest of the Emond's Fielders, but even he was yawning by the time Moiraine announced that they would stop for the night on one of the Islands. Lan and the boys unsaddled and hobbled the horses while Nynaeve and Egwene set up a small oil stove to make tea. Looking like the base of a lantern, it was what Lan said warders used in the Great Blight, where the wood could be dangerous to burn. It gave just enough heat to boil water. He also pulled several three-legged stands from the packhorse's baskets so they could set the lantern poles around their campsite.

Loial examined the Guiding for a moment, then sat on his hind legs and rubbed a hand across the dusty, pockmarked stone. "Once things grew on the Islands." His voice was heavy with feeling. "The books tell of it. The Islands had green grass to sleep on, soft as any feather bed. Fruit trees, blooming no matter what the time of year outside."

Egwene handed the ogier a cup of tea. He held it but did not drink from it. He just stared into the tea as if he could find the fruit trees in its depths. Moiraine touched him gently on his— shoulder? hip? what words applied to someone with six limbs?— at the withers, Perrin supposed, then sat down at the stove.

"A place like this and you set no wards, Aes Sedai?" Nynaeve asked. "Surely there must be worse than rats in this. Even if I haven't seen anything, I can still feel."

The Aes Sedai rubbed her fingers against her palms with a grimace. It was odd to see her show such distaste on her face. "You feel the taint, Wisdom, the corruption of the Power that made the Ways. The taint here is not like that on *saidin*, even if that is likely how it started. Here, it is everywhere. I will not use the One Power in the Ways unless I must. Whatever I tried to do would surely be corrupted."

Everyone joined Loial in his silence then. Lan handed out the food, then ate his own meal methodically. His eyes looked distant, as if he were stoking a fire, and Perrin wasn't sure he tasted a bite. Moiraine ate all of hers, and as tidily as if they were not squatting on bare stone quite literally in the middle of nowhere. Perrin tried to eat his own, but he had no appetite, and soon he was staring off into the darkness, too.

He was lost in thought, or thoughtlessness, when something rushed at him from the left at eye level. It was Child Panet. He was jabbing the butt of Perrin's own axe at his head. Perrin brought his forearm up to block the attack, knocking the axe from Panet's hands. He grabbed for Panet's throat with his right hand, but when he wrapped his fingers around the other man's windpipe, it was not a man at all. It was Egwene, struggling to breathe.

Perrin let go. He looked down to find that he had not knocked the axe down, but a cup of hot tea, now shattered on the ground. He gasped for breath, feeling a tightness in his chest. Egwene coughed and put her hands to her throat. Then she threw herself at Perrin and wrapped her arms around his neck.

"It's okay," she said, cradling his head. "It's okay, Perrin. It's me. He's not here. No Whitecloaks here. It's just me. You're alright, I promise."

Perrin gave two loud sobs, then felt himself calming down. He wasn't sure how the others had reacted to his little fit, but only Rand and Lan were standing now, though everyone was looking at him and Egwene.

"I'm sorry," he whispered to her. "I don't—I'm sorry. I don't know..."

"Okay," she said again. "You're okay."

After a few minutes, she leaned back and looked him in the eye. Even in the dark he could see her tears glistening. She smiled and kissed him on the forehead. "Okay," she said one more time, then sat back down next to him.

Rand and Lan sat down, completing the circle. Everyone was silent, gathered around the tiny flame of the oil stove as if it could keep them

warm. Perrin was shoulder to shoulder with Mat on one side and Egwene on the other. He kept his eyes down, but he could feel Mat's uncomfortable gaze on him from time to time. No one said anything about what had just happened, and the darkness just grew heavier, more suffocating. The mood was glum; Perrin was not the only one looking down.

Moiraine and Lan, of course, looked to have the same moods they always did. They may have been capable of only one mood each. They certainly didn't seem concerned with the heavy, impossible darkness they were swimming through. They didn't show any signs of alarm at Perrin's behavior, either, now that they were both seated again. Moiraine studied all of them as she ate, then finally put her plate aside and patted her lips with a napkin. "I can tell you one cheerful thing. I do not think Thom Merrill is dead."

They all looked up at that. "But," Rand said, "th-the fade..."

"I don't remember a lot from the past few weeks," Mat said, "but I remember Thom charging the fade, and I remember his screams as he died."

"Yes, you told me," the Aes Sedai said. "When we were in Whitebridge, people mentioned a gleeman, but they said nothing of him dying. I think they would have, had he been killed. Whitebridge is not so big as for a gleeman to be a small thing. And Thom is a part of the Pattern that weaves itself around you three. Too important a part, I believe, to be cut off yet."

It was Rand who broke the silence that followed. "Min. Min saw something about Thom."

"She saw a great deal," Moiraine said. Her lips curled in a half smile. "About all of you. I wish I could understand half of what she saw, but even she does not. I know not whether Min's Talent is old or new, but she sees true. Your fates are bound together. Thom Merrill's, too."

Nynaeve sniffed and poured herself another cup of tea. "I don't know about all that," she said, "but I know our fates are bound up with being well-enough rested to push hard tomorrow. Come, Aes Sedai. It's time we decide

just what tea you'll be drinking tonight." She pulled her medicine bag from her pack and drew Moiraine aside. They did this almost every night, Nynaeve asking how Moiraine felt and choosing the herbs that would help the most.

Loial had already retired—he slept on his side, curled up, Perrin noticed—which left just the boys and Egwene.

"Moiraine Sedai told us about this Min on the road to Caemlyn," Perrin said to Rand, "about her Talent. Do you remember what she saw about any of us?"

"Yeah, some of it," said Rand, "but none of it makes any sense. Like, for me she saw a sword that's not a sword. What's that supposed to mean? She didn't know any better than I. Or Mat, what did she see for you?"

"Well, a red eagle, that's Manetheren, ain't it? A dagger with a ruby, we know what that means now. Then the eye on a balance scale, that's a riddle, yet."

"And for you, Perrin," Rand said, "I remember a wolf, and a falcon and a hawk perched on your shoulders, and an Aielman in a cage."

A wolf. Perrin shut his yellow eyes for a moment. *Even in the Ways, the wolf haunts me.*

"Me, I can't see how Min saw a thing about any of us," Mat said with a grin. "As I remember it, she spent most of her time looking at al'Thor."

"Did she?" Egwene asked with a raised eyebrow.

"I-I-I— she did not," Rand said. "She just— we talked a couple of times. She's— she dresses like a boy, and her hair is as short as mine. Shorter."

Perrin was surprised that Rand was so flustered. Sure, Mat had teased him a little, but there was no cause for him to be so embarrassed. "Min was just

somebody at the inn in Baerlon,” Perrin said, thinking to give Rand some room to breathe. “Not like Aram.”

Egwene choked on her tea. “Too hot,” she said as she tried to regain her breath. Perrin smiled.

“Wh-who’s Aram?” Rand asked. He didn’t sound like he was needling her, though; just like he wanted to know.

“Yes, Egwene,” Mat said with a grin as wide as his face. *Mat* was needling her. “Who is Aram? Was he one of the Whitecloaks? No, that seems unlikely. A Tinker, then? Did you meet a nice Tinker boy?”

“Yes, she did,” Perrin said. “Aram’s a nice Tinker boy who dances— what was it you said, Egwene? Like a bird? ‘Dancing with him is like flying with a bird.’ I’m sure that was it.”

Egwene went bright red, then. “He was— Aram— he was just a boy. Yes, a Tinker. He wasn’t…”

“A Tinker boy?” Rand didn’t sound at all like he was teasing her. He sounded— and looked— hurt. *Why would Rand be hurt?*

Egwene turned to Rand, and now *she* looked hurt. Or sorry. *What’s going on here?*

Egwene set down her cup down. “I don’t know— eh— I don’t know if anyone else is tired, but I’m going to sleep.”

Perrin watched silently as she rolled herself up in her blankets and lay down. *Is something going on between Rand and the Mayor’s daughter? When did this happen?*

“Al’ Thor,” Mat said, still grinning ear to ear, “maybe you ought to tell them about Farmer Grinwell’s daughter. Tell them about Elsa.”

Now it was Rand's turn to go bright red. "Sleep, yes," Rand said. "Sleep sounds good to me right now."

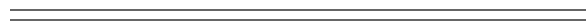
"Ah, come on, Rand," Mat said. "It's a good story. This farmer's daughter — quite easy on the eyes, as I remember— she stared at him all day as we worked in the barn, and then over dinner and after, when we juggled and sang with them. And then, when we were sleeping in the barn, up in the loft, what should wake us up— well, wake Rand up anyway— but Elsa Grinwell sitting astride him, with her hands— where were her hands, al'Thor? Anyway, it was the racket they made as woke *me* up."

Rand punched Mat in the shoulder. Perrin just sat there with his mouth hanging open. *Egwene, and a pretty farmer's daughter, this Min in Baerlon — when did Rand al'Thor get so good with girls?*

Egwene looked just as surprised, and lay back in her blankets, turning away from them. Rand did the same.

"I thought it was a good story, anyway," Mat said to no one in particular. Perrin gave him a shrug, and then they went for their blankets, too.

As he fell asleep, Perrin realized he hadn't thought about wolves since they had stopped for the night.



Egwene woke to the feeling of Lan shaking her by the shoulder. "Up, lass."

After weeks of being chased on the road, going from asleep to a horse had become a pretty quick switch. She barely had time to wonder if Lan had slept at all before she was atop Bela, kicking her gently into motion. Moiraine did not allow them the time for tea, and they ate breakfast in the saddle. It was their standard traveling meal— bread and meat and cheese. It served well enough, but she took no pleasure in it. She missed the Tinkers'

food. Even that meager meal at The Queen's Blessing was the fondest of memories on days like this.

Rand seemed to be ignoring her, which she allowed him to do. Everything between them had felt strained since reuniting in Caemlyn. Each time they spoke was more awkward than the last. And Rand felt... *distant*. Ordinarily, she was the one who needed to clear a little breathing room. But now, she wanted to pull him closer and he was pushing back. So she let him ignore her, for now.

Why did Perrin have to mention Aram? True, he didn't know about her and Rand, but still. He'd been aiming for embarrassment, that much was clear. But she had nothing to be embarrassed about. Nothing happened. Not really. And she had thought that everyone was... well, that she and Perrin might have been the only ones to make it out of Shadar Logoth. It was certainly nothing for Rand to be upset about. It had nothing to do with how she felt about him.

And she *did* feel for him— more than she would have reckoned. She was tired of the secrecy and the sneaking about. That had been exciting at first, but things were different now. *She* was different. And it wasn't the braid that had done it. It was the outlands. *What are you afraid will happen if people know? Whatever it is doesn't matter anymore, not when we've got Shadowspawn snapping at our heels.*

This was stupid.

Egwene pulled up alongside Rand. Bela was a fair deal smaller than Rand's new bay, and Egwene was short even among girls her age back home. So Rand fair towered above her now. She took a breath.

"Hi."

"Hi."

"Hi. I just— things seem awkward, with us, yeah? I mean, even before last night. And then last night... Aram was— he wasn't like Perrin was making

out. It wasn't like we, I mean, nothing happened. Not really. He was just a boy. A nice boy. It was just— I liked having someone to dance with, and people who loved music and dancing and laughing. It was nice to have that when I thought you were, I mean, that you all were...”

“Yeah,” Rand said. “A-and nothing happened with Elsa. I mean, *she* tried, a lot, but I never... and besides, her father chased us off before anything could happen. I mean, he was shooting arrows at us. Literally.” Egwene laughed a little at that. “Nothing happened... but it could have. A pretty girl fancied me, and she didn't pretend not to, or feel like she had to hide it. I liked it.” He looked Egwene in the eye then. The laughter had died in her throat. She wasn't even smiling. Rand's eyes were starting to glisten. She tried to take a deep breath, but she couldn't. “Gwennie, I can't do this— this thing we do. Not anymore. I can't spend my time hiding from your family, hiding from the town. I can't wait any longer for you to— to— to take my hand and— and pull me out of the shadows so we can walk in the sun. That's never going to happen. And even if it did, it would be too late. That sun's already set.”

This isn't real.

“But— but I don't want that either. I'm— the sun hasn't set. I'm ready. Ready to— ”

“Egwene. I'm just...” His voice was cracking. “Something is different. I don't know what, or why, but it is. I've known it since I saw you in The Queen's Blessing's kitchens. What— whatever we had, the outlands have robbed us of it.”

“That's— that's not how I feel. That's not— it's not right. You don't mean — ”

“Maybe later, when all this is over. If it's ever over. But right now— ”

She couldn't listen anymore. She felt her throat clench tight and her eyes begin to water. She kicked Bela ahead. She sidled up to Nynaeve, but the Wisdom would have no comfort to offer. She didn't know about Rand, and if she did, she would think it a girl's foolishness. So Egwene passed

Nynaeve without a word and settled in next to Perrin. For all the misery of their time on the Caralain Grass, it had tied the two of them together. She had lived her whole life with four sisters, but now she had a brother. She found comfort in his presence, even if he didn't know about her and Rand. And he didn't need to hide his yellow eyes from her; she knew all about the wolves.

"Ho, Egwene," he said after a moment's silence.

"Ho."

"I ain't see you two together anyhow."

"Two— who— ?" *How does he know?* "I— I'm sure I don't know what you mean, Perrin Aybara."

"He's good-looking enough, I reckon, and ain't no one else like him in the Two Rivers, for true. But he's a bit... *wary*. Got his guard up all the time. You, you're leaping from the thinnest limb, stretching out your fingers on faith they'll find another branch. Could make for an interesting pairing, I suppose. But I ain't surprised it can't hold up."

"How— how did you— ?"

"I know what I see, and what I hear. You two don't talk near as quiet as you think you do. And my ears, lately— never mind. That ain't important."

Wolfbrother. "Then you know what he said. I— I missed him so much. I missed him, and he fooled around with some farmer's tart daughter. How could he— "

"Come, now. You can tell anyone you want that nothing happened with Aram, but I was there. I'll not tell stories as are yours to tell, but neither will I nod my head silently so you can get away with lying to yourself."

He was right. What happened with Aram *wasn't* nothing. But he was never more than a stand-in, a dummy version of Rand.

“He was *dead*.”

“Or he may well have been. I know. And he might be tomorrow. *You* might could be. This place”— Perrin waved his hand at the blackness surrounding them— “this place is like a death of its own. I think maybe you’re looking for something to make you feel alive.”

“You— when did you get so smart?”

He smiled down at her, but didn’t say anything.

“Well, it’s nice to see you smile again,” she said. “And to hear you talk. I was half afraid the Whitecloaks had cut out your tongue while I wasn’t looking.”

He stuck his tongue out at her, as if he had six years instead of sixteen. She laughed. It felt good to laugh in the face of this place, but the sound didn’t carry as it should have. It died in the air.

“No,” Perrin said, his smile fading. “I still have my tongue. But they *did* take something from me. Or I lost it. But I think it’s coming back. Seeing everyone again, even in a place like this”— he waved again at the darkness around them— “it lifts the spirits.”

They rode in silence like that for a stretch, and she thought about what Perrin had said. Was she lying to herself? Why did she suddenly feel desperate for Rand? She’d never felt that way before. Not when he was stuck out in the Westwood for weeks, not when he was cross and wouldn’t talk to her, not even when she and Perrin were making their way to Caemlyn, through capture and torture, fearing Rand and the rest were dead or worse. So why now? Was it about her and Rand? Or was Perrin right; was it about something else— like always being one step from death?

She thought through these questions and more as they walked, over and over again until Lan stopped them for lunch— which, like breakfast, was bread and meat and cheese, and, like breakfast, they ate in the saddle. As

they ate, Lan said rather casually, "Someone is following us. Or something."

Before anyone could say anything, Mat had his sling out and whirling. "Stop!" Lan said just as he released his stone. "There's no way to tell who it is."

"It must be some breed of Shadowspawn," Mat said. "What else would be in a place like this besides something evil?"

"Well, us, for one," the warder said. His voice was as flat as ever, but Egwene would have sworn that was dry wit and not a lack of feeling.

"It could be another traveler," Egwene said. "An ogier, maybe?"

"Ogier have more sense than to use the Ways," Loial said. "Most do, anyway."

"What do you feel, Lan?" Moiraine asked. "Is it something that serves the Dark One?"

Lan shook his head slowly. "I don't know," he said. "I cannot tell. Perhaps it's the Ways, and the taint. It all feels wrong. But whoever it is, or whatever, it's not trying to catch us. It almost caught us up at the last Island and scampered back across the bridge so as not to. If I fall behind, I might surprise it though."

"If you fall behind, warder," Loial said, "you'll spend the rest of your life in the Ways. Unless you can read ogier script and understand how the Guidings are written. It's not a cipher, but it is nearly its own language."

Lan shook his head again, and Moiraine said, "So long as he does not trouble us, we will not trouble him. We have no time. Less than that."

As they rode off the bridge onto the next Island, Loial said, "If I remember the last Guiding correctly, Manetheren should—"

He cut off as the light of their lanterns reached the Guiding. Near the top of the slab, deeply chiseled lines, sharp and angular, made wounds in the stone. Egwene didn't see Lan tense at all, but she got the distinct impression that the warder was somehow even more alert than usual as he circled his stallion around the Guiding, spiraling outward.

"This explains much," Moiraine said softly. "So much. And it makes me afraid. I should have guessed. The taint, the decay. I should have guessed."

"Guessed what?" Nynaeve asked.

"I've never seen or heard of anything like this." Loial said. "What is it? Who did this?"

The Aes Sedai faced them calmly. "Trollocs." She ignored their gasps and muttered oaths. "Or fades. Those are trolloc runes. The trollocs have discovered how to enter the Ways. That must be how they got to the Two Rivers undiscovered: through the Waygate at Manetheren. There is at least one Waygate in the Great Blight." She glanced toward Lan before continuing; the warder was far enough away that only the faint light of his lantern could be seen. "Manetheren was destroyed, but almost nothing can destroy a Waygate. That is how the fades could gather a small army around Caemlyn without raising an alarm in every nation between the Blight and Andor." Pausing, she touched her lips thoughtfully. "But they cannot know all the paths yet, else they would have been pouring into Caemlyn through the gate we used. Yes."

"They don't use the Ways easily," Lan called. His lantern was no more than twenty spans off, but the light of it was only a dim, fuzzy ball that seemed very distant to those around the Guiding. Moiraine led the way to him. Egwene regretted eating lunch when she saw what the warder had found.

At the foot of one of the bridges the frozen shapes of trollocs reared, caught flailing about them with hooked axes and scythe-like swords. Grey and pitted like the stone, their bodies were half sunken in the swollen, bubbled surface. Some of the bubbles had burst, revealing more pierced faces with their cracked skin and ribbon-like hair, forever snarling with fear. It was

enough to turn anyone's stomach, and Egwene heard someone— Mat?— retching behind her. Even for trollocs, this was a horrible way to die.

A few feet beyond the trollocs the bridge ended. The signpost lay shattered into a thousand shards.

Loial approached slowly, eyeing the trollocs as if he thought they might come back to life. He examined the remains of the signpost hurriedly, picking out the metal script that had been inlaid in the stone. "This was the first bridge of the path from here to Tar Valon," he said.

Mat was scrubbing the back of his hand across his mouth, with his head turned away from the trollocs. Egwene buried her face in Perrin's shoulder, and he stroked her hair softly. She felt him shuddering at the sight.

"Then it is as well we are not going to Tar Valon yet," Moiraine said.

Nynaeve rounded on the Aes Sedai. "How can you take it so calmly? The same could happen to us!"

"Perhaps," Moiraine said, her voice as calm and even as ever. Egwene could practically hear Nynaeve's teeth grinding. "It is more likely, though, that the men who made the Ways, the Aes Sedai, protected them with traps for shadowspawn. It must have been a concern then, before the halfmen and trollocs had been driven into the Blight. In any case, we cannot tarry here, and whatever way we choose, back or forward, is as likely to have a trap as any other. Loial, do you know the next bridge?"

"Yes. Yes, they did not ruin that part of the Guiding." He was already on the move before finishing his thought.

Moiraine Sedai might not have believed a trap could be set for them, but for all the haste she spoke of, she made them travel more slowly than before, pausing before letting them onto any bridge, or off one onto an Island. She would step Aldieb forward, feeling the air in front of her with an outstretched hand, and not even Loial or Lan was allowed to go ahead until she gave permission.

Egwene peered into the darkness around them, but she could not see anything more than ten feet away. She strained her ears, but heard only the sound of their own saddles creaking, and the horses' hooves, and their own ragged breath. Even those sounds were muffled. She thought of whoever—or whatever— was following them. Was it a trolloc? Some other shadowspawn? Was it just one creature, or were there more? Lan couldn't tell, and he couldn't scout their rear for fear of getting lost forever in the Ways. So Egwene peered and listened. Nothing but them, them and their horses. They crossed bridge after bridge, ate another small meal a horse, and crossed still more bridges. Some took five minutes to cross; others, more like an hour. At one point she thought she heard a wind, but she must have imagined it. It was so quiet and distant, and she never felt the air stir on her skin. Besides, it was less like wind and more like thunder, and there certainly wasn't any weather in the Ways. Of course, she supposed that wind itself was a sort of weather. She was considering this when Perrin said, "Moiraine, Lan— look!"

She brought Bela to a stop just short of the next Island and looked where Perrin was pointing. Behind them and to the right, and about a hundred spans up above them, was a thin line of light, so dim Egwene could hardly see it. But Perrin saw it well enough. His eyes, gleaming yellow in the torchlight, were fixed steady on it.

"And do you hear it?" he asked. Egwene listened, and the thunder she had imagined before was suddenly quite real, if distant.

"Impossible to say in here, at this distance, but I would guess trollocs," Lan said. "I'd say a fist, at least. It would take many torches to make so visible a line in the Ways, and many a drum to make such a rumble."

"Loial," Moiraine Sedai said, "how many more bridges?"

"Six, I think. Maybe seven."

"Then let us away. Time was short and now seems gone. We have none left to waste."

And then they heard an angry, wailing scream, buried under a hundred blankets but still unmistakable. The trollocs were blowing their horns.

The Last Guardian

The first bridge they crossed was short, and it filled Mat with hope that they would soon be home. That hope took ill on the second bridge, and died on the third. Each took upwards of half an hour, and that was while moving faster than they had at any point since entering the Ways.

All the while, the line of torches remained visible and the drums beat dully at the blanketing darkness. As Mat and the others moved along the second bridge, the trolloc line seemed to circle behind them until it was over their left shoulder instead of their right. It didn't seem to be getting any nearer, but when they reached the Island after the third bridge, the trollocs had clearly gained ground. The line was narrower, but brighter and closer. Mat figured it must be moving in more or less the same direction as they were now, giving it less of a profile. *They're coming right for us.* Mat wished, not for the first time, that they could put their own lanterns out, but they had no chance of making their way safely without the same light that marked them for the trollocs.

They paused only long enough for Loial to inspect the Guiding and figure out where to go next. Mat groaned when Loial circled the Island until stopping at a ramp that went almost directly back the way they had just come. They went more slowly here, as the ramp had no walls or guardrails. If this had been another gently arcing bridge, or even a gradually climbing ramp, they would have seemed to be bound to pass more or less directly under the trollocs. But this was one of the steeper ramps they'd been on, and they seemed to be climbing to meet their pursuers.

Mat could hear his heartbeat in his ears and had to remind himself not to strangle the reins. More than once he had to wipe his palms on his cloak. *It's alright. We're alright. We'll reach an Island soon and turn again.* But they didn't. Ten minutes, twenty, climbing steadily until they were at eye level with the line of light, which was more like a ball now. *We're headed for them on a line.* The torches still looked a fair way off, as far as Mat could tell in this nearly tangible darkness, but they were dead ahead. A trolloc horn screamed angrily as the black of the Ways tried to smother it. Mat stifled an instinctive urge to turn and fly back to the last Island, away from that horrible sound.

Slowly, the ramp began to veer left and level off. In a few minutes, it ended at the Island Mat had been so eager to reach. The torches now seemed to be below them, but he wasn't sure he could trust anything his eyes told him.

“How many more crossings, Loial?” Moiraine Sedai asked, raising her voice a bit. The drums were louder now. Closer.

Loial looked up from the stone Guiding with a tired grin. “Two, Aes Sedai. Two more to reach Manetheren.”

Manetheren. The Two Rivers. We come home, likely with another trolloc attack on our heels. It'll be like we never left.

Loial found the next crossing— a bridge this time— and led them over. They moved faster now that they had walls at their sides to guard against a fall, but that only brought them more quickly to the vast emptiness where the bridge had crumbled. This time, their lantern light did not even reach the other end.

“Burn me,” Mat said.

“Blood and bloody ashes.” That was al' Thor.

“What now, Aes Sedai?” Nynaeve's voice was an accusation.

“Loial,” Moiraine said, “do you have a course to recommend?”

“Whatever course we plot from here,” said the ogier, “it begins back on the last Island. Back now, and quickly. We can decide when I get another look at the Guiding.”

By the time they reached the Island, the drums had become a rolling thunder. The line of torches couldn't have been more than three crossings away, maybe just one. Mat fancied he could feel the air moving from the force of countless trolloc mallets against countless trolloc drums. The hair on his arms stood on end.

“This way!” Loial was practically shouting now, leading them over the next bridge.

“Do you know how many crossings remain,” Lan asked, “now that we've had to change course?”

“I can't say. The last Guiding was broken in more than one place. I'm fairly certain this was the best bridge from there, but more I can't say till I can look at another Guiding.”

They moved at a canter. Mat had to stop himself from pushing his horse harder. He knew that some of the others wouldn't be able to navigate this darkness at a full gallop. Come to think of it, he didn't know if the ogier could keep up with a galloping horse. Definitely best to let Lan and Loial set the pace.

Mat closed his eyes for a moment and just felt the horse beneath him, felt the power and grace, felt the subtle control in his hands and wrists, in the squeeze of his legs. Even with everything going mad around him, Mat could still enjoy the tremendous freedom of riding.

But the Guiding at the next Island was no better. One minute, two minutes Loial hunched over the stone slab. The trollocs blew their horns, sounding like a tortured cry from the lungs of the Ways themselves. But when the horns died down, the Ways went right on wailing, a wounded howl that sounded impossibly distant and easy to hear at the same time.

“Loial,” Mat said, “ain’ t you say there’s no wind in the Ways?”

The ogier licked his lips. “*Machin Shin*,” he whispered. “It’s the Black Wind.”

“Moiraine,” Lan said, “any time we had to decipher stones has passed and won’t return. We must run blind.”

“Agreed,” she said. “Lead the way. Loial, children, follow Lan. The first white line you see, follow it to the Waygate. Now go!”

Lan was away before she had finished talking, headed across the closest bridge, and the rest were right on his tail. It didn’t matter how comfortable anyone was on horseback, they all galloped now. Loial seemed to have no trouble keeping pace. Mat remembered his description of those touched by the Black Wind. *It was as if the darkness had sunken into their bones. They never laughed again, and they feared the sound of the wind.* He was surely not the only one; everyone pushed hard, and then pushed harder.

Running at full speed, they seemed to put some distance between themselves and the trolloc horde for the first time. With every minute that passed, the drums and horns fell farther back, even if just a little. But the sight of the next Island seemed to knock all of those sounds right out of Mat’s head. He heard the trollocs only as distant white noise, and he didn’t hear the Black Wind at all. This wasn’t like any of the other Islands they had seen. Not only was it one of the few without a white line leading to a Waygate, it didn’t even have a Guiding. Which struck Mat as sensible, since it had only one bridge other than the one they had come across on, and that was directly across from them.

But it was not what the Island lacked that made it extraordinary, it was what it had: a giant skeleton unlike any animal Mat had ever seen, alive or dead. It was a giant beast, bigger even than the ogier. The main part of the body didn’t look much different than a sheep’s or a dog’s— just bigger. Ribcage, fore and hind legs, nothing out of the ordinary. The neck was quite long, though, and its skull looked more like a snake’s than a farm animal’s, with two rows of giant fangs on each jaw, and long, dagger-like horns coming

out of the back of its head. Its tail was even longer, maybe as long as the rest of the skeleton from nose to pelvis. But what made the beast truly strange, and stoked Mat's curiosity something fierce, were the gigantic wings sprouting from its shoulders.

Mat's jaw hung open. He didn't even think to say anything, and apparently no one else did, either. After a moment's silence, Loial asked, "Aes Sedai, what is that?"

Moiraine Sedai swung her leg over her saddle and hopped to the ground. "I am not sure," she said, walking slowly toward the skeleton, "but I think it is a dragon."

Mat looked at Perrin and Rand, who just shrugged, wide-eyed. "But Moiraine Sedai," Mat said, climbing slowly to the ground, "the Dragon was a man. Everyone knows that."

"Not *the* Dragon, Matrim, *a* dragon. A beast from the Age of Legends and before. Many— maybe most— of those who have heard of them think dragons are but a myth. There have been no verified sightings since the Breaking, and any records from earlier were lost long ago. Some think the dragons disappeared during the Time of Madness, some that it was even earlier. Whether real or not, most learned scholars believe that it was this beast that Lews Therin was named after."

Mat reached out and ran his finger along one of the wing bones— they looked like long fingers stretching back toward the tail. *A beast from the Age of Legends. What are you doing here?* Moiraine Sedai stood near the animal's head, but Mat saw something glimmering at the other end, tucked into the curled-up tail. He started to turn and felt a hand on his back, just below his shoulder. He saw Egwene and flashed her a grin.

"Moiraine Sedai," he said, "there's something over here."

As she walked over, Mat thought of what the ogier had said in Caemlyn. *The path to the eagles' home will lead to the prize that has long been lost.* He stepped carefully, picking his way through the bones to whatever was

twinkling in the light from their lanterns. He turned and saw Moiraine was right behind him. Egwene had stayed back, and the rest were all still on their horses— save Lan, who was making a circuit around the skeleton with a hand on the hilt of his sword.

The object seemed to be a metallic sphere, burnished and fine. It was three or four feet in diameter, and as he got closer, Mat saw that it was not a singular ball, but rather two interlocking shapes, one silver and the other gold, combining to look what almost looked like the world's biggest, most precious marble. The two sections were not mere halves of the sphere, split evenly down the middle. They were like ovals pinched in the center, or hourglasses with rounded ends, or flat peanut shells, and the fat ends of each were tucked into the hollows of the other. Both halves were covered in some script that Mat didn't recognize. He bent down to touch it, and instead of the cold of metal it felt slightly warm, absolutely hard but also... forgiving somehow.

“Moiraine,” Lan said, “the bridge.”

Mat turned to find the warder pointing back in the direction they had come from, only the bridge they had crossed was gone. It had disappeared. *That's not possible.* Could his eyes be deceiving him? He remembered again the ogier's words: *Where the pattern twists and turns, in the place without up or down...* These were they Ways, and this was hardly stranger than the rest of what they had seen. *The Ways are just...different.*

“The pattern pushes us again,” Moiraine Sedai said half to herself, “but toward what? Impossible to say. At the least, we are cut off from the trollocs for the moment. Matrim,” she said, turning to him, “what have you found over here?”

Mat showed her the sphere, and the Aes Sedai knelt down to inspect it. She ran a finger over the surface; she didn't say anything, or show any reaction at all, but he was sure it had felt as strange and wonderful to her as it had to him. She leaned in close, seeming to read the bizarre characters that might have been random shapes for all the sense Mat could make of them. *The*

prize that has long been lost. Was this what the ogier's friend had meant? Was this the Eye of the World? Mat looked back at Egwene, whose big eyes were as wide as he'd ever seen them. "The Eye?" she mouthed to him silently. He nodded. What else could it be?

"From a lost Age," Moiraine said so softly that Mat could hardly hear it. "And now that you are found, what becomes of the world?"

As Mat strained to hear her, he realized that the racket from the trollocs was getting louder, or closer. Maybe both. But even above the trollocs now was the wail of *Machin Shin*, like a tick burrowing into Mat's brain through his ears.

"Moiraine Sedai," he said, along with three or four of the others.

Moiraine cocked her ear, then stood and whipped off her cloak. She wrapped it around the sphere and threw the thing over her shoulder. It must have been far lighter than it looked, because she lifted it with so much force she nearly lost her balance. It was probably the least graceful thing Mat had ever seen her do. She looked Mat in the eye, then turned back to the group.

"The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills," she said. She handed her cloak—and the treasure inside it—to Lan, who lashed it to his saddle. "We have found the Eye of the World," she said, vaulting her way atop Aldieb, "as the Foretellings promised we would. But that matters little if we cannot get out of the Ways before the shadowspawn or *Machin Shin* gets us. Let us move, and quickly."

They raced across the lone remaining bridge, galloping once again and hoping this bridge was still whole. As they ran, Mat looked over his shoulder once at the pile of bones they left behind. He tried to imagine a dragon, alive and flying. It would have been a thing to see, and to fear. *No wonder they named Lews Therin Kinslayer after it.* This bridge was a long one, and the trolloc noise seemed to be getting louder with every step. Then Mat saw it ahead of them—the line of torches. It was dim at first, but unmistakable in that darkness. *We're running into their arms.*

When they hit the next Island, Lan didn't even slow down. As soon as the light of the lanterns caught the white line running from the Guiding, he swung in that direction and the rest followed. Mat and Moiraine were trailing after having to get back on their horses at the last Island, and everyone else was down the lane toward the Waygate when Mat saw the one thing he least wanted to see: trollocs, and closing. They were halfway across their own bridge, coming hard.

"Move it, move it!" he screamed as he raced off the Island. "The trollocs are on us!"

He didn't know if anyone heard him above the horses, the drums, and the rising whine of *Machin Shin*. He just kept pushing the dun as hard as he could. Moiraine's white mare kept pace, and the two of them were closing on the others. He could almost reach out and touch the packhorse. All around him he could hear the wind, seeming now to be filled with howling, hidden voices heavy with hunger and lust and frustration.

Flesh so fine, so fine to tear, to gash the skin; skin to strip, to plait, so nice to plait the strips, so nice, so red the drops that fall; blood so red, so red, so sweet; sweet and pretty screams, singing screams, scream your song, sing your screams...

Out of the darkness the gates appeared, vine-carved and standing alone in the black like a tiny piece of wall in the night. The others, stopped at the Waygate, were looking back his way and, from the look of their eyes, at the trollocs behind him. Moiraine leaned out of her saddle and reached toward the carving.

"*Avendesora*, there you are," she said. "The leaf of the Tree of Life is the key." She pulled the trefoil leaf free and replaced it a hand higher in the carving. Again Mat saw vines and plants of stone come to life as the Waygate swung open. There again was the dull, mirror-like gleam, and on the other side was the world. It was mid-morning light that streamed through, pale and thin, but it seemed to Mat as if the noonday summer sun were trying to blind him forever.

As soon as the gate was cracked wide enough for a horse to pass, they all started streaming through. Nynaeve and Loial went first, with Perrin and Rand a step behind. When they reached the other side, they all slowed to a crawl. Mat's dun seemed reluctant to join them, probably because it looked like Rand would be underfoot as soon as they did. But Mat knew that they, too, would slow down on the other side, and that everything would be fine. It was another blast from the trolloc horns that finally convinced the mare to brave the smoky gleam of the Waygate. He felt the icy chill again, the strange sensation of being lowered slowly, facedown, into a winter pond. Just as before, the shiver crawled across his skin in the tiniest of increments and seemed to go on forever. *Can the wind catch us, held like this?*

As suddenly as a pricked bubble the chill vanished. He was outside. His horse, for one brief instant moving twice as fast as she had been, stumbled and almost pitched him over her head. He dug his fingers into the dun's mane and squeezed his legs hard. She straightened out and he kept her moving, away from the gate that three people still had to come through.

Made it. Mat smiled as he turned back to wait for Moiraine, Lan, and Egwene to join them on this side of the Waygate. His smile died quickly.

"Dismount!" Lan shouted as he sprang through the dull mirror. "Dismount and draw your weapons. They are coming. Now!" He vaulted out of his saddle, drawing his sword in midair. He landed, spun around, and assumed a fighting stance all in one motion. Mandarb ran on without him, over a rise and out of sight. Egwene came through running hard and pulled up beside Nynaeve.

Mat was already off of his horse and grabbing his staff from his pack when Moiraine finally emerged. The Aes Sedai charged past Lan and stopped hard next to Egwene and Nynaeve. Lan charged at the Waygate, arriving just as the first trolloc came lurching out into the world. Mat turned his mare toward the rise, which was directly opposite the Waygate and about fifty paces away, and smacked her on the rump. "Hyah!" he yelled, and she ran to what he could only hope was safety.

When Mat turned back around, four dead trollocs littered the ground at Lan's feet, but three had set on him together and were pushing him away from the Waygate. Rand stood well behind the warder with his sword drawn. Perrin was just getting his axe loose from his pack and urging his horse to follow the others over the rise. Loial was pulling a pair of wooden clubs from his knapsack. No, "clubs" was the wrong word. These were not so crude. They were near as long as Mat's quarterstaff— though they looked smaller in the ogier's massive hands— and gently tapered to create a natural handle and a heavy head. They looked perfectly balanced and smooth, each an exact match of the other, but somehow they didn't look carved at all. *They look as if they must've grown straight from the ground like—*

Mat had thought he understood how large Loial was. Then the ogier stood up— not on four legs, but on just two. The limbs Mat had thought of as his front legs now seemed to be a second pair of arms; their feet were actually hands, and their toes straightened out to reveal themselves as another set of long, thin fingers. Standing, the ogier measured at least two spans. He dwarfed everyone around him. The hands on his lower arms held the staves, and those above splayed out as if ready to swallow anything that walked below. He truly looked as if he'd been plucked straight from a gleeman's tale.

Lan took three steps back. The pile of trolloc bodies at his feet was beginning to limit his mobility, and there seemed to be a brief lull in the flow of shadowspawn from the Waygate. The ogier moved up till he stood even with the warder, maybe ten paces away from the Waygate. Mat stood about five paces behind them, with Perrin and Rand flanked wide to either side. Moiraine Sedai, Egwene, and the Wisdom were clustered behind him and to his left.

Facing the gate, the group stood in a small open field at the border of a wood stretching to their right and a dark, clouded mountain range rising ahead of them, beyond the Waygate, and curving around to their left. At their backs was the gentle, rocky hill that the horses had disappeared behind. Little grew on that slope save some creeping grass, but even a quick glance at the wood told Mat that the trees had leaves, more than he would

expect unless they were evergreens, which they were not. *Mayhap a liveliness left over from the old ogier grove this Waygate served.*

Mat returned his attention to the Waygate in time to see movement on the other side of its dim shimmer, followed quickly by a trolloc bursting through. A horrible sound came from its mouth, like a consumptive man's cough after inhaling a fistful of gravel. Was it laughing? talking? dying? The thing looked first at Lan, then the rest of them. Then it leapt to the top of the pile of carcasses Lan had left at the foot of the Waygate. It took a horn from its belt and blew a long note of blood and broken glass.

This is it then.

Another trolloc came through. Then another. And another. Within seconds, Mat had lost count.

Listen to the Wind

“Please, Moiraine Sedai,” Egwene said. “There must be something I can do beyond staying safely tucked away behind you.” She knew there was nothing, but she couldn’t stop herself asking. She hated feeling powerless—or worse, like a liability.

Moiraine looked at her coolly for a moment. “Do you think you can embrace the True Source, but hold yourself there, at the point of embracing? You must be open and yielding—steady at the moment of surrender.”

Egwene didn’t say anything at first, too surprised that Moiraine had not simply dismissed what sounded like a child’s whining even to her own ears. Lan was meeting trollocs with steel as they came through the Waygate. Egwene was sure Moiraine saw it, but the Aes Sedai seemed wholly unconcerned.

She focused on Moiraine’s question, then nodded. *I’ve been doing my exercises. I can do that.* She closed her eyes and thought of the pool, and of the waterfall that didn’t splash. She relaxed. She drifted, surrendering herself to the flow of the water. It was a trick. On the brink of embracing *saidar*, she could almost taste its sweetness, feel its warmth coursing through her; to not draw on the One Power took all of her concentration. To focus so intently and still stay relaxed, still remain “steady at the moment of surrender”—it did not come as easily as Egwene had expected.

She gasped. Suddenly, the Power was flowing into her. No, this was different. Not *into* her. *Through* her. Through her and into Moiraine Sedai.

It was like being seized by the scruff of the neck. *Saidar* swept through Egwene to Moiraine, and when she pulled back by reflex, she found her flow was held, melting into Moiraine's own. When she stopped resisting and surrendered again, a sense of awe came over her.

Her feelings and Moiraine's tumbled together in Egwene's head and body. The calm that Moiraine felt even as they were chased from the Ways by the Black Wind and a trolloc horde was breathtaking, a strange kind of emotional beauty. The calm settled into Egwene, and soon she couldn't tell which emotions were hers and which were Moiraine's. That should have been chilling, she was sure, but instead she felt the warmth and comfort of a closeness that couldn't have been matched had they been sisters, had they been of one flesh.

"Well done, Egwene," Moiraine said. "We are now linked. You are as strong as I thought you'd be. Maybe stronger."

A screeching wail came from the Waygate—a lone trolloc blowing its horn, standing on the bodies of those that had fallen to Lan's sword. Others stepped out of the Ways and into the world, and soon a wall of them was advancing toward Lan and Loial, who stood in front of the boys.

The Power surged through Egwene. "Child," Moiraine said, sounding awed herself, "your abilities with Earth will be... extraordinary." The Aes Sedai threw her arms up and a thick wall of stone rose from the ground, a circle surrounding the freestanding Waygate with an opening three or four paces wide in the front. The trollocs had only one direction to go now: straight at Lan and Loial in the front. They charged and the battle was truly begun.

"Lan," Moiraine called out, "they will be unable to outflank us, but we still must get to the Waygate to close it."

A brief glance and a short nod were Lan's only answer, and then he was lost in the sword.

Stedding Shangtai was in the mountains, just east of Tear. It was cool, much cooler than wherever Loial and his companions now found themselves. This new place was uncomfortably warm, even in the winter. Warm and damp. And the smell was not right. He threw off his cloak and pulled two staves from his pack.

Loial did not care for fighting. Ogier did not have wars, and had never really understood why humans did. A war against the Shadow, yes. That made sense. But wars amongst each other? It was foolish. And distasteful. And just... *stupid*.

So it was not as a seasoned warrior that he stepped up to face the trollocs coming through the Waygate, and the myrddraal that were surely driving them. But while ogier were a famously peaceful people— slow to anger, and slower still to act in anger— they had also earned a reputation as unflinching, steadfast warriors when called upon by need and circumstance. Loial had no intention of sullyng that reputation here.

The warder had slain the first wave of shadowspawn on his own, while Loial was still getting his batons out of his pack. Now the two of them stood side by side as the first trolloc of the second wave blew a long, rancid note on its horn. Loial wondered if its kinfolk on the other side of the Waygate heard that deranged clarion call. *That would be an interesting thing to test*. He sighed. It didn't matter if they could hear it or not. They were coming all the same.

They came in numbers, and soon more than a dozen stood shoulder to shoulder, walking forward. With more pouring out of the Waygate, it would not be difficult for the trollocs to circle round and have at Loial and his friends from all sides. *This venture is doomed*.

The trollocs advanced and began to fan out. This was Loial's first close look at the creatures. Stedding Shangtai was just east of Tear, much farther south than shadowspawn were wont to roam. His stomach turned at the sight of their white skin sloughing off and exposing the grey flesh below, at the sight of the dozens of pins and studs and hoops piercing each of their faces, at the

sight of rotten teeth and whiteless eyes. Fear fluttered in his stomach and his feet. But Loial had not ventured Outside without being prepared to defend himself. He tapped the batons in his secondhands together three times, then balled his firsthands into fists. *Come then.* He started walking, then running, to meet them.

Midstride, the earth exploded in front of him. He stumbled to a stop, ducking and covering his face. A stone wall was rising from beneath the dirt, encircling the Waygate. It was a span thick and three spans high, with an opening directly in front of Loial and Lan. He could have drawn a straight line from where he stood, through the gap, then the trollocs, and ending at the Waygate. The trollocs looked up and around frantically, realizing they were penned in. Lan seized the moment of confusion and leapt into the gap in the wall, the gap between themselves and the shadowspawn. The warder made quick work of two before they had a chance to counter, but a third and fourth were working together and had him on the defensive.

This wall— the Aes Sedai's doing, clearly— changed the battle completely. Instead of being exposed on all sides to a superior force, they now had only to guard a narrow pass at which they had arrived first, if only by a few heartbeats. A situation that could be met only with a grim, futile stubbornness had become one where Loial could feel a slight, if foolish, hope. *At the least, I can protect Rand.*

Loial had become quite fond of the young human. Rand was the only person he'd met Outside who had extended kindness and friendship. To be sure, not all had been cruel or aggressively afraid. But Rand al'Thor had looked to Loial for companionship, in the process daring to trust a stranger from a race totally alien to him. When Rand and Mat had stumbled into The Queen's Blessing, Loial was questioning the merit of his journey and wondering if it were time to return to the *stedding*. But in Rand he found a kindred spirit— young, from a secluded, rural place but now out in the world, alone (except for Mat, who at the time was no companion at all) and overawed.

Rand and his friends had turned Loial's time Outside from a disappointment to a real adventure. A potentially deadly adventure, yes, but also one that could save the world. These three boys were *important*— the girls too, probably. So Loial had to help keep them safe. The boys had their weapons, but Loial did not think they were terribly adept fighters. Egwene and Nynaeve would no doubt be powerful channelers someday, but they could not command their gifts yet. He and Lan and the Aes Sedai would need to keep the trollocs at bay. The wall gave them a chance to do that.

At least twenty trollocs were now trying to get past Lan and the two trollocs that had engaged him. There was enough room for two or three to get by, but only one had come so far forward. Loial rushed to meet him. The trolloc swung a broad, crudely made sword. Loial parried with one baton— his weapons were sung wood, and would stand up to most any blade— and delivered a ferocious uppercut with the other, tearing the trolloc's jaw free from its face. The jaw landed three paces away, and the trolloc went down in a heap.

Loial filled the space to Lan's left. Trollocs now came pouring out of the Waygate. His batons whirled in his secondhands, deflecting and attacking in equal measure. His height allowed him to see the entire battle as it unfolded. The gap acted like the neck of a bottle or hourglass, limiting the number of trollocs who could engage him and Lan, but the many who could not were building into a mass that would soon threaten to break through and trample them. While his batons kept trollocs busy at ground level, Loial began to attack from above with his firsthands. He reached down and grabbed the head of one of Lan's trollocs and did the same to another who was a few rows deep in the mass of its confederates. He lifted them out of the mob and flicked his wrists outward, swinging their bodies back but keeping their heads in place. They were flailing, hoping their feet would find purchase, swinging wildly with their swords at the strong arms above them, when Loial felt their necks snap. He flicked again and twisted. The heads popped off their bodies and fell into the crowd, spouting a purple blood as dark as pitch. He tossed the heads aside and reached into the crowd again.

That's when the lightning started.

It was not a bolt of lightning, but a barrage. Most came from the sky, like arms reaching for bodies that burst when they touched. Sometimes a bolt seemed to grow from inside the belly of one trolloc and then spread out to caress those nearest to it. Loial had never seen the like. *Better to embrace the sun than to anger an Aes Sedai.* The attack was thinning the trolloc ranks, but it was also motivating those still standing to charge all the harder at Loial and Lan. And more just kept streaming out of the Waygate. In fact, they were coming faster by the second.

It was all Loial could do to stand his ground. Where he had been essentially fighting on two levels— up close at ground level with his secondhands, deeper into the crowd from above with his firsthands— he was now using all four of his hands to fight the trollocs right in front of him. His baton caved in a trolloc's skull; with his firsthands, he quickly grabbed the body and took the sword from its dead hand before the blade could fall to the ground. Now he stabbed downward into the heads, necks, and shoulders of the shadowspawn.

The trolloc bodies piled up in front of them until they formed a wall so thick even Loial could not reach across it. Free from any worry of hands or swords or batons, again and again the trollocs lowered their shoulders and ran full force into the wall of their dead. The trollocs pushed the wall, and the wall pushed Loial and Lan. Trolloc blood was turning the earth below their feet to mud, and Loial could feel himself starting to slip back. If this continued, it would not take the trollocs long to break free of their stone cage.

Loial tried to clear the wall, grabbing body after body and flinging it aside. *Can't lose the gap. Can't let them reach the others.* Five children from peaceful farm country couldn't stand up to a trolloc horde. It was too much to ask.

He slipped and fell a step back.

It was a helpless, hateful feeling, watching the strongest among them lose ground while she did nothing. Unless hiding behind the Aes Sedai counted as something. Nynaeve spat and tugged idly at her braid. Hateful.

Egwene, looking dazed, sat to her left. Being the Aes Sedai's plaything had worn the girl out. After the first round of lightning strikes, Moiraine had broken whatever link the two had made and said, "Wisdom, hold her steady. The poor child is well spent." So here Nynaeve sat, tall in her saddle, holding Egwene's hand and watching uselessly as trollocs threatened to overrun the two strongest of their party.

Time stretched and bunched strangely as the battle unfolded. It seemed like no time at all before Lan and Loial were losing ground to the trolloc push, yet each instant seemed to Nynaeve to last a year, a lifetime. Some moments seemed completely silent, others filled with clash and clamor. She saw every slice of Lan's sword, every blow the ogier's long batons landed, every bolt of lightning the Aes Sedai sent from the skies. She saw every wound inflicted by trolloc blades, and could only hope that these were not of the same make as the one that had nearly killed Tam al'Thor. Whether they were or not, it was plain that most of the blood pooling under Lan's and Loial's feet was not their own, but their foes'. This brought her only small comfort. She was a Wisdom, and her impulse was to stop bleeding, heal wounds, save lives—even the enemy's.

The ogier was so large, so strong, that it was hard to believe the trollocs could force him from his spot, but her eyes didn't lie. Loial was slipping slowly backward. Lan was a skilled fighter, a crafty woodsman, and many other things besides. But she doubted very much that he was as strong as an ogier, and he was losing ground even faster than Loial.

The anger grew in her as she watched her companions slip back inch by inch, fighting off death blow after death blow. She was just trying to protect the children, who had run away only to protect Emond's Field. Loial was

simply defending his only human friend in Rand al'Thor, and Lan was just doing his duty as a warder. Nynaeve couldn't vouch for the Aes Sedai's motivations, but that aside, no one here deserved to be hunted across half of Asur, attacked, possibly killed. They had done nothing to these trollocs, or to their masters. It was the same thing she so hated about sickness: it was just so *unfair*. The innocent perished, and there was little anyone could do about it. *Unless she can draw lightning from the clouds*. She looked up at the thunderheads raining down the Aes Sedai's bolts. For a moment she thought she could hear the wind. That hadn't happened in... well, in far too long.

"Nynaeve!"

She turned to Egwene, who was looking at their clasped hands. Nynaeve saw that she was squeezing the girl's hand like a vise. She let go, then took a breath and relaxed her belly when she realized it was clenched, too. She wiped the sweat from her brow. *As cold as the winter has been, this heat is wrong somehow. I know it.*

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to hurt you. I just hate to see—"

A sound came from the direction of the fighting. It was not the familiar, harrowing call of a trolloc horn. Nor was it the sound of trollocs being severed from their myrddraal. This was something else, from the creatures' throats, in its way more terrifying than those other sounds. She heard glass being gargled and sheets of steel being rent in two. A lightning shiver ran from the base of Nynaeve's fingers up her wrists and arms, then down her spine to her tailbone and her privates.

A sudden surge from the shadowspawn pushed Lan and the ogier back with a lurch, though both kept their balance. The wall of dead trollocs was moving behind the force of those still alive. Some of the living were not pushing that wall, but scaling it. The ogier was tall enough to fend the first few off by himself, but soon there were too many to keep at bay. They came over in droves, falling down upon the two fighters and swallowing them

like a river running over stones when the dam breaks. Lan's sword was a blur even as he disappeared under the flood of shadowspawn.

"No!" Nynaeve shouted. Before she could think she had kicked Clover into a gallop. She had no idea what she'd do when she got down there, but she couldn't just sit back anymore.

"Nynaeve!" Egwene's voice barely made it to Nynaeve's ears through the horrible noise of the trolloc horde. "Where are you going? You can't—"

Egwene kept on, but Nynaeve stopped listening. She would dive headfirst into a stone lake before she would let those things kill Lan, or any of the others. *Enough*. She rose up higher in her saddle and stared down the avalanche of trollocs. *They will not hurt him. They will not hurt anyone*. Her anger was hot in her cheeks. Suddenly Loial burst from the middle of the scrum, his lungs letting out a throaty, deep-bottomed roar. He stood to his full height and lifted Lan's limp body above his head with his upper arms.

"No!" The word turned into a scream of rage, a sound with no spelling or formal definition. Nynaeve felt the fury coursing through her, thick like syrup and hot like Mama's tea. She took in the scene before her— Loial holding Lan above the fray, trollocs spilling over the wall of their dead and through the gap in Moraine's wall, the three Emond's Field boys clutching their weapons as the horde approached them— and time seemed to slow. She felt a pleasant coolness flow through her, deeper even than her bones. She focused on the trollocs. She had to stop the trollocs. Some were trying to bring the ogier down. Some were simply running, seeming to flee the Waygate more than chase any of them. Some she even saw fighting with one another, looking crazed. *Of course, they always look crazed*. She tilted her head, pointing an ear toward the sky. She was *sure* she could hear the wind now. But what was it saying?

Nynaeve's mouth curved in a dark smile. She reached her clenched right hand up toward her left shoulder, and flung her fist toward the river of shadowspawn, fingers opening as if she were throwing something. A sudden, violent gust of wind knocked the advancing trollocs back. She saw

Loial stumble for an instant, but he spread his legs and planted firm. The wind seemed to curve around the ogier, as trollocs to either side were blown in opposite directions away from him. When he had a few feet of breathing room, the wind picked up even more, beating trollocs back until they slammed against the Aes Sedai's wall so hard they were knocked unconscious. Some hit the stone with such force that they split open and their innards burst out of them. They looked remarkably similar to human innards, but that stirred no compassion in Nynaeve's heart now.

With Lan slung unconscious over his shoulder, Loial scampered— as much as someone standing twelve feet tall *could* scamper— to the side, away from the wind and the battle. Those few trollocs who were clear of the wind made relatively easy prey for Matrim and the other boys. These attacked with more fervor than Nynaeve had yet seen from any trollocs, but also with more recklessness. They truly did seem crazed, and soon fell to staff, axe, and sword.

Nynaeve pulled up as she approached the wall surrounding the Waygate. A ring of freshly slain trollocs had built up the base of the wall, complementing the heap of corpses that had fallen at the hands of the ogier and warder.

“Is that all?” she shouted to no one, her voice still sharp with ire. She looked to her right at Loial, who had set Lan down on the ground and was tending to him. He was bleeding badly from his left side, right below the ribcage, and looked unconscious. Nynaeve's eyes darkened. “Have you no more?” she yelled at the sky.

“We always have more, little girl.” The coarse voice came from the far side of the large pile of dead trollocs. “Girl, girl, wants more. Wants to feel our fingers in its eyes, our voice in its belly, our blades on its tongue.”

A black-clad figure with skin as white as fresh snow and smooth flesh and bone where eyes should be emerged on top of the bodies. It stood straight, looking over the entire scene with its nonexistent eyes, and even the still-strong gusts of the dying wind did not stir its cloak.

Another joined it, then another.

“The Black Wind drove these simple things mad,” the first one said, “easy to beat. Us it only made stronger. Sharper.”

Another fade topped the trolloc heap, and another. Within moments, a dozen halfmen stood above them. The strength that anger had put in Nynaeve’s back was gone. Now she was just afraid. Too afraid to move.

“Come, come, girl, girl. Let us see how much more we have.”

Sword of Light

“Thank you, Wisdom. Well done. I will take things from here.”

Rand looked over his shoulder to see Moiraine walking up, head high and showing no sign of the fear that gripped his own heart. She had left her mare with Egwene, who looked a good deal more nervous than the Aes Sedai, for all that she was staying well back.

Nynaeve turned toward Moiraine’s voice with a faraway look that said she was still caught in the fade’s eyeless stare. *She doesn’t even hear Moiraine Sedai’s words.* Rand didn’t blame her. The fade hadn’t even been talking to him and his knees felt like warm jelly. The thing had spoken directly *to* her. Plus, she had just channeled. A lot. It was the only explanation for what he’d just seen. *That was— did she know she could do that?* He took a few steps forward— he, Mat, and Perrin had fallen quite a bit further back as Lan and Loial had engaged the trollocs— and tugged gently on the Wisdom’s sleeve.

“Wisdom,” he said, doing his best not to look at the line of halfmen towering over him from atop the pile of trolloc carcasses, “you have to—”

One of the fades from the right side of the row let out a screaming laugh, or a laughing scream, and leapt right at the two of them. As it rose in the air, the halfman reached down and slipped a long, curved, black blade from a scabbard Rand had not noticed. It gripped the sword with two hands and drew it over its head, ready to strike at him or the Wisdom, or maybe both. But when it reached the top of its jump, Rand felt the air change and the hair on his arms stand on end, and as soon as the fade began its descent, a

crooked spear of white light shot down from above and pierced the thing through its gut. The laughter died, and all that was left was the scream.

Rand turned away as myrddraal flesh showered down on them. He grabbed Nynaeve's hand and her mare's reins and dragged them back, away from the hillock of dead and living shadowspawn. "Come on!"

"You should not have let my companions get clear," Moiraine said to the halfmen. "It leaves me with no reason not to do this." She balled her hands into fists and held them together, back to back, between her breasts, then flung her arms wide and splayed her fingers wide in one fast motion.

The heap of dead trollocs in front of them erupted in ten-foot-tall flames that spread as her hands did, so that soon the bodies Nynaeve— Nynaeve! — had left at the base of the wall were burning, too. Rand threw his arm up to guard his face from the heat and kept pulling at the Wisdom and her horse until they were back with Perrin and Mat, well away from the flames that had swallowed a dozen fades. He slumped against the mare and turned to watch the last of the shadowspawn burn away.

The screeching of the halfmen hidden behind a wall of fire and smoke turned his stomach. He waited expectantly for the sound to die away, but it held steady. In fact, it seemed to be growing louder. Then one foot stepped out of the flames, and a second, and foot upon foot until ten or more halfmen stood before them again, their cloaks still and smoldering, soot on their pale skin and manic, gnashing grins on their faces.

"Witch," said the one in the middle, "these tricky tricks are good for trollocs, but you will need something better to survive us. Try again, again, again." The halfman turned to its kinfolk. "Take the boys alive if you can. But take them."

Turning back to Rand and the others, it broke into a sprint and then seemed to disappear into the tremulous shadows that the flickering flames cast over the strange, uneven surface of the trollocs' corpses. When it re-emerged from the darkness at their feet, it was standing directly behind Moiraine. She looked over her shoulder and ducked as the halfman's sword swung

through where her head had been. Even with the black, tainted blade mere inches from landing what could be a killing blow, she looked graceful, effortless, easy. A circle of air around her seemed to quiver, then expanded outward so fast it knocked the fade back ten paces and hard on its rear.

By the time the fade stood back up, its fellows had sprinted through the shadows and now surrounded Moiraine. The Aes Sedai was turning in a slow circle, keeping eyes on all of them at once. The things wove their swords through the air in complicated, twisting motions, but did not move against her. *What are they waiting for?* As soon as Rand had the thought, the fades attacked. They came at her in groups of three or four, each from a different angle, striking like vipers and then pulling back to their circle. Moiraine seemed to counter them with blasts of air that knocked their swords aside, but with so many coming at so many different angles, Rand doubted she could last for long. He looked at Mat and Perrin, whose eyes flickered yellow in the light of the burning bodies.

“We have to help her,” Perrin said.

“Aye,” said Mat, stepping forward.

Rand gave his friends— *we are friends now, aren't we?* — a crooked smile that he hoped masked his doubt and dread. “For Manetheren,” he said, trying to show heart for what he feared would be a quick and grisly slaughter. He turned to Nynaeve. “Stay here, Wisdom. We’ll need your care and comfort when this is over.”

With that he, Mat, and Perrin raised their weapons and ran toward Moiraine, hoping to give her some small help that would make a difference. Perrin let out a roar, and Rand and Mat followed suit. Their voices seemed to fill the air until the sky cracked open. When the volley of lightning came down, the thunder crack drowned the boys out completely, and the white light nearly blinded Rand. The only reason he could see at all was that the lightning darted around the ring of halfmen in flashes of less than a second each, leaving pockets of relative darkness where he could make out the fades writhing in convulsions or just exploding like the one that had leapt at him

and Nynaeve. The lightning storm must have lasted half a minute or more—easily the longest Rand had seen strike a single spot, whether natural or channeled.

When it finally stopped and the smoke cleared a little, all the halfmen were dead, and many were in pieces. It took him a moment to spot Moiraine, who now looked quite helpless crumpled in a small heap in the center of the ring of halfmen.

“Moiraine Sedai!” Rand cried. He started toward her, but hadn’t taken two steps before Nynaeve’s horse cantered past him. He stopped short and watched the Wisdom jump out of the saddle and kneel at Moiraine’s side, checking for a pulse, checking for breath, checking for life. *She can’t be dead.* The boys stood to the side and watched, and Egwene walked Bela and Aldieb slowly up to join them.

“She fared better than the myrddraal, but she did not escape untouched,” Nynaeve said, holding two fingers against the top of Moiraine’s neck under her jaw. “Her heart is beating. A little jumpy, but it’s going.”

Rand gasped when Moiraine Sedai suddenly sat up. She coughed a few times and looked wildly to her left and right. It was the first time he’d ever seen her seem out of sorts. Without her hooded cloak, her hair stuck out in every possible direction. Her dress was not only slightly charred but ragged between shoulder and belt, as if cut to ribbons. Her left shoulder was exposed to the top of her breast, and Rand could see a strange pattern on her skin like bare winter branches, or lightning itself. An image from his blackout dream—Moiraine holding the grey-eyed baby and suckling him at her breast—flitted through his mind, and he felt a hand squeezing his heart.

Nynaeve snapped her fingers in front of Moiraine’s face. “Aes Sedai, do you know who I am? Where you are?”

Moiraine kept looking around for a second, then met eyes with Nynaeve. “Wisdom,” she said, blinking rapidly. “Help me up.”

Nynaeve stood and lifted Moiraine to her feet, helping her pull up her dress and cover herself. Moiraine, already looking calm and composed, took in the scene around them and the sky above, then smacked her tongue lightly against the back of her teeth as if trying to work some moisture into her mouth. “Do you feel the heat and the heavy rot in the air?” she asked. It *was* warm, Rand realized—warmer than he’d felt all year—and had been since they’d left the Ways. “Unless I miss my guess,” Moiraine continued, “the Waygate has let us out in the Great Blight. A bad bit of luck, that. Where is Loial?”

Nynaeve nodded her head to where Loial was standing guard over Lan. Moiraine walked toward the two of them, gingerly at first but with more confidence at each step. Rand and the others trailed maybe half a dozen paces behind. He put his hand on Egwene’s calf and squeezed gently. She looked down from her saddle, and the worry in her eyes matched his own. If they lost Moiraine Sedai...

“Loial,” the Aes Sedai said as she approached the ogier and her warder, “is there any way to close the Waygate so that the Dark One’s forces cannot use it anymore? Whether this is the Waygate they used to reach Manetheren I cannot say, but any gate in the Great Blight is a danger to all Asur.”

Loial stood—on four legs, now—and made room for Moiraine to reach Lan. “Yes, it is possible, Aes Sedai. A Waygate cannot be destroyed, as you well know, but removing both Avendesora leaves completely will kill it.” He grimaced. It was plainly a loathsome thought. “The only way to open it again will be for the Elders to bring the Talisman of Growing.” He let out a resigned sigh. “I will see to it.”

Loial made his way toward the hole in Moiraine’s wall that led to the Waygate, and Moiraine knelt down at Lan’s side. The warder had many small cuts, but none that looked too deep. His left eye and cheek were bruised, and his eyes didn’t open even at Moiraine’s touch.

“Come now, Last Lord of the Seven Towers,” she whispered as she put a hand on his forehead and one on his chest, “I have need of you yet.”

Last Lord of the Seven Towers? Rand shared a look with Mat, remembering Lan's battle cry on the Hills of Absher— "The Seven Towers! For the Seven!"— and knew Mat was remembering the same. Moiraine closed her eyes and a chill ran over Rand's skin. He doubted he would ever get used to women channeling.

Lan's next few breaths were deep, then he opened his eyes. He looked around at all of them gathered there, with his eyes resting first on Nynaeve and then on Moiraine. "The battle is won?" he asked.

"That it is," Moiraine said, "though not without cost. You will not be at full fighting strength for two days or more. At least one of the trollocs' blades was foul with the taint of Shayol Ghul. And I have little left in me. Come, now. We need to find the horses and get moving. Nothing good comes of tarrying in the Blight."

Almost as if summoned, Mandarb and Aldieb topped the rise they had disappeared over before the battle, with the boys' horses trailing. Rand started to smile, but stopped when he realized that the horses were coming at a dead gallop. *They're running from something.* As they drew closer, Mandarb seemed to pull at Rand's mind like the earth pulls at a falling stone.

As the black stallion reached them and pulled up, a sound from the other side of the rise split the late morning sky— a sound terrific and familiar— and Rand knew what the horses were fleeing.

"More trollocs," Perrin said softly, giving voice to Rand's own thought.

A line of figures began to rise above the hill's crest. That line turned into a swarm, and the swarm into an army. And still Mandarb tugged at Rand's mind. *Something is different about that horse. What is it?* He looked the stallion over but couldn't figure why it occupied his thoughts so.

"Blood and ashes," Mat said. "From the *other* side, now? Should've known we wouldn't get through this without having to fight. Us, I mean." He waved a hand at Rand and Perrin.

Loial returned, standing at his full height. “Moiraine Sedai, no more trouble will come through that Waygate. You should stay here with Lan and the Wisdom and the girl. Do what you can from behind. I know you are well spent. We will do our best to keep them away for as long as we can.”

“We will?”

Rand didn’t know if Mat meant it as a joke, but he laughed anyway. He didn’t feel much like laughing, but there it was.

Lan, Moiraine, Nynaeve, and Egwene went into the walled circle around the Waygate, taking the horses with them. Rand stepped forward alongside Mat and Perrin. They spread out so as to cover the entire opening in the wall, and Loial stood at their head. Even with a seemingly endless trolloc horde closing fast, Rand couldn’t help but find the ogier’s figure imposing. And still, with Loial standing two spans tall and the shadowspawn advancing, Rand turned back toward the Waygate. Toward the warder’s stallion.

“Rand!”

Rand turned at the sound of Perrin’s voice and saw his friend pointing his axe above the hill, where a swarm of dragkar was emerging to join the trollocs and fades on the ground. Rand closed his eyes and took three deep breaths. *A single flame. All my passions. Empty. Void.* And for the first time since leaving Emond’s Field, Rand was able to wrap himself in the void. He opened his eyes.

In the void, he felt something, saw it, though he knew it was not there to see. Without turning around, he saw a glowing rope reaching upward from Moiraine’s cloak, lashed to Mandarb’s saddle. *It’s coming from the Eye of the World. What is that thing?* White like sunlight seen through the purest cloud, heavier than a blacksmith’s arm, lighter than air, the cord stretched out toward the clouds, waiting for someone to take hold of it. Even behind him and out of his field of vision, it was almost blinding; even the ogier and the advancing army of shadowspawn seemed almost not to exist. The cord was all. It hummed. It sang. It called to Rand. It *wanted* him. The sound of

it filled the void. He didn't move his hands— they stayed at belt level, holding his sword— yet he reached up and touched one bright strand of that rope. He gasped. Light filled him, and heat that should have burned yet only warmed as if taking the chill of the grave from his bones. The strand thickened.

The trollocs were on them now, driven by halfmen on horseback. To Rand, everything seemed to be moving slowly. It took little effort to parry the trollocs' blows and land his own. The din of the battle was only a murmur in the back of his mind. He was cut off from the others; the only one still in view was Loial, who would have been visible from a league away.

The rope pulsed, and Rand pulsed with it. It felt like the heartbeat of the world, filling all of his body, all of his consciousness, all of the void. He felt warmth in his chest radiate to his every edge, the brilliant, awful radiance of the sun, bursting.

Somewhere in the muffled noise he heard Mat cry out as a trolloc knocked him over and he had to use his quarterstaff as a lever to spin himself back to his feet. He heard Perrin's axe sink time and again into shadowspawn flesh and bone, throat and lungs, crotch and head, each time with a grunt, each time with breath more labored.

He held his sword in his hand, but it was not his sword. It was no longer the heron-mark blade that Father had given him, but a blade of blinding light. Even as he raised it, a fiery white bolt shot from the point, as if the blade itself had reached out. It swept the battlefield like the focused light of a lantern, and every trolloc it touched glowed until it was as bright as a star on the ground. The light moved through the army like a candle's flame through paper, burning through them, blinding Rand's eyes to the scene.

But it seemed that for every trolloc that burned, two more came forward. In the calm of the void, Rand tried to see the battlefield from Loial's viewpoint, from a bird's. He cleared room around himself with a mighty circular sweep of his blade of light, then pointed it upward, toward the sky. Lightning seemed to leap from the tip of the blade up to the clouds

gathering above them. But what the clouds sent back was not mere lightning. Yes, scores and scores of bolts shot down, skewering draghkar after draghkar and running through the hearts of the shadowspawn on the ground. But pure fire rained down, too, and icy hailstones the size of a boar's head. Each came down with such force that it ripped through its target and buried itself deep in the ground. The hail opened holes, the fire made dirt burn, and the lightning made the earth explode five feet in the air, hiding much of the field from view.

The sky hurled its anger for a second, a minute, an hour— Rand couldn't tell. When all was done, and the last fade fell twitching to the ground, no one was left standing, not even Loial. Rand had time to wonder if the others were dead, hiding, or knocked out cold before he fell to the ground in a heap and everything went black.

Fal Dara

When the dust settled, only Rand was still standing, and he quickly collapsed and joined everyone else on the ground. Egwene vaulted out of her saddle. At least, it *felt* like she vaulted. In reality, she knew it was more of a ponderous climb down to the ground from Bela's back. She was still feeling drained from linking with Moiraine.

She made her way toward Rand as quickly as she could, but Nynaeve and Moiraine both beat her to him, the Wisdom just ahead of the Aes Sedai.

The clearing was littered with the mangled bodies of trollocs and halfmen. By the time Egwene reached Rand, Moiraine had already laid a hand on him—Egwene thought she could sense the Aes Sedai channeling, but she wasn't sure—and moved on, looking for Mat and Perrin.

"How is he?" Egwene asked when she reached Nynaeve.

"He's not waking up," Nynaeve said, "but the Aes Sedai says he needs only some rest." By her tone, Nynaeve was not so certain. She pressed the back of her fingers lightly against his cheek. "He is too warm, but his breathing is steady. Moiraine is weak after the fight, but has given him what Healing she can."

"Nynaeve," Egwene started.

Nynaeve stood up. "Yes?"

"What— what did we just see? I mean, he didn't..."

Nynaeve closed her eyes and took a deep breath, bowing her head. “I don’t know,” she said. “All I know is that three Emond’s Field boys were out in this field, unprotected, as trollocs stormed around them and death rained down from the skies. And I’ll do whatever I can to help them.”

Egwene nodded, but she was sure of what Nynaeve refused to admit: Rand had channeled the One Power. He was doomed to death and madness, sooner rather than later. She and Nynaeve watched together in silence as Moiraine picked her way through the trolloc bodies, looking for two young boys from Emond’s Field. Two of her friends.

Twice Moiraine stopped, twice she knelt down, and twice she stood back up and moved on. When she stopped for a third time, Egwene realized she had forgotten about Loial. Loial, who along with Lan had shielded all of them from the first wave of trollocs. She hated herself a little then.

Finally Moiraine made her way back to Egwene and Nynaeve, just as Lan was emerging from within the round wall. “All three are healthy, or soon will be,” Moiraine said. “Scratched and bruised, not much more. Rand seems to have come out the worst.”

“Moiraine Sedai,” Egwene said, “did he— that is, I thought Rand seemed to...”

Egwene had never seen Moiraine look so tired. “Yes, child. He was channeling *saidin*, and using it to save us all. His fever is a reaction, like any wilder has. To come so soon after the incident— this is not the first time he has channeled.”

“But he can’t— that’s...” Egwene felt her own throat strangling her words before she could say them. She tried not to blink; she didn’t want the tears welling up in her eyes to spill down her face. Nynaeve took Egwene’s hands in her own. Egwene pulled one back and wiped her tears away with her sleeve. No one here would understand them, that they were not the same tears she might shed for Mat or Perrin. *Well, Moiraine may know.* She wiped her eyes again and sniffed.

“His life will not be easy. It will not be simple. Beyond that I cannot see, and neither can anyone. The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills. Wisdom,” Moraine said, turning to Nynaeve, “do you have any spirit of hartshorn?”

“Aye, in my pack,” Nynaeve said. “Shall I rouse the others?”

“Please do. Lan,” she said, turning to the warder who had joined them without making a sound, “you know the Blight as well as anyone. Do you have your bearings? What is our next destination?”

“We are far to the east, Aes Sedai. We make for Fal Dara now, though I fear we will need to delve deeper into the Blight before we can make our way out again.”

“Ill for us, but the Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills. Come, let us ready the horses.” She turned to Egwene and Nynaeve. “It is probably best we say nothing about how the fight was won, in case Loial and the others did not see it. Men like Rand... it is a delicate subject.”

Lan lingered and shared a long look with Nynaeve. “You still have yet to see me try, Wisdom.”

“And I hope I never do,” Nynaeve said. It was clearly something that stretched back to the days after they were separated in Shadar Logoth, but its meaning escaped Egwene. Lan nodded at both of them, then turned to follow Moiraine.

“For once, the Aes Sedai and I agree,” Nynaeve said to Egwene as the Aes Sedai and warder walked to the horses. She looked in Egwene’s eyes and squeezed her hand. “I’ll be right back. I just need to fetch my pack.” With that, the Wisdom hurried off in the same direction as Moiraine and Lan.

Egwene looked at Rand, his face peaceful and his eyes closed, and the hint of a smile on his lips. Lips that she had kissed and nibbled, that had nuzzled in her neck and sucked on her nipples. Lips that would soon run over with the mad ramblings of a man poisoned by the Dark One’s taint. She reached

out to touch him, then drew her hand back. *He channeled the One Power.* She felt ill, and ashamed for it.

When Nynaeve came jogging back with her pack of herbs and remedies, Egwene jumped at the chance to get away from Rand, and the thought of what he was. Surrounded by dead creatures from a gleeman's tale, lost in the Great Blight, tending to injured friends, she found comfort in assisting Nynaeve as she would have back home, before Winternight.

Not that the Wisdom needed much help. The boys were easy enough to wake, and Loial was sitting up before they even reached him. Nynaeve and Egwene explained that the battle was over, and won, but that the Waygate had deposited them in the Great Blight. That provoked a worried silence from everyone, and nobody said much else as they made their way back. *Did they see Rand, what he did? Or are they simply still groggy? Maybe they're in shock.* When they circled back to Rand and Nynaeve knelt down to tend him, Egwene stayed standing, looking off in the distance, trying to ignore the queasiness she felt whenever she thought of Rand al'Thor.

When she heard nothing from Nynaeve or Rand for what seemed an eternity, Egwene looked down. Nynaeve turned to her with worry in her eyes. *A reaction to channeling. How can she help with that?* Egwene knew Nynaeve was having the same thought.

"The hartshorn isn't working."

"That is not so surprising." Moiraine and Lan were approaching with the horses. "He came out of the battle worse than any of us. As I said, he needs rest. His body seems determined to get it."

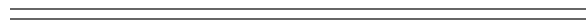
"Well, so... what do we do?" Mat still looked pale and listless.

"Blacksmith, take his saddle for your horse," Lan said. "The sheepherder will ride slung over his bay. We'll need some padding— perhaps his bedroll — and a rope to secure him."

They transferred Rand's saddle to Perrin's horse and ended up using both Rand's and Mat's bedrolls to give Rand some cushion. He didn't stir at all as they lifted him onto the bay and tied him down.

What if he never wakes up?

It frightened Egwene to realize that she didn't know if that would be good or bad.



These woods were unlike any Mat had ever seen, and they got stranger and more frightening the deeper he and the others went into them.

The trees were even more sickly than he had guessed when he saw them from afar. On the edges of the forest, trees that by rights should have been dormant and bare were covered in leaves stained and spotted with yellow and black, with livid red streaks like blood poisoning. Every leaf and creeper seemed bloated, ready to burst at a touch. Flowers hung pale and pulpy on trees and weeds in a mockery of spring. Mat could swear he saw the sickly, waxen things rotting while he watched.

As soon as they were deep enough into the wood to lose sight of the clearing, the air became nigh unbreathable. Through his nose it carried the sweet stench of decay, heavy and thick. Through his mouth it tasted like spoiled meat shoved unchewed down his throat. Either way, he was like to sick up. He took the scarf from around his head and covered his face below his eyes. It helped, but only a little. And it made the damp heat that much worse.

The horses' hooves made a soft squishing as rotten-ripe things broke open under them. It sounded like the air felt— wet, hot, foul. It reminded Mat of the Mire in the depths of summer, back in the Two Rivers. In that boggy swamp every breath came as if through a wool blanket soaked in hot water.

Eventually Mat did heave, emptying his stomach on the forest floor. It was hard to tell his sick from the rotten vegetation underfoot.

Egwene was ill, too, but Perrin seemed unaffected. Nynaeve was pale and kept swallowing. She had set her jaw and fixed her eyes on Moiraine's back. Mat knew that look. *She won't admit to being ill without Moiraine does first. Stubborn as ever.* The Aes Sedai didn't look much better, eyes tight and lips pale, though the warder hardly seemed to notice the foulness in the air.

Loial had a scarf wrapped around his nose and mouth, just like Mat. When he met Mat's gaze, outrage and disgust were plain in his eyes. "I had heard —" he began, his voice muffled by the wool, then stopped to clear his throat. "Faugh! It tastes like... Faugh! I had heard about the Blight, read about it, but... that even the Dark One should do this to trees." His voice was equal parts heartbreak and fury.

Deeper into the forest, the corruption of the Blight became more and more obvious. Instead of spotted black and mottled yellow, now leaves fell wetly to the ground, breaking apart from the weight of their own foulness. The trees themselves were tortured, crippled things, twisted branches clawing at the sky. Ooze slid like pus from cracked bark and split branches. The trees seemed to tremble as they passed, as if the horses' footsteps shook them to the roots.

"They look as if they mean to grab us," Egwene said.

"And some of them do," Moiraine said, looking back over her shoulder. Her eyes were as hard as Lan's, if not harder. "But they want no part of what I am, and my presence protects you."

Mat laughed uneasily, though he knew it was no jest.

"Touch nothing." Lan didn't turn around, but his flat voice carried easily to the back of the line. "Flowers can kill here, and leaves maim. One little thing, called a stick, likes to hide where the leaves are thickest, looking like its name, waiting. When something touches it, it bites. Not poison. The

juice begins to digest the stick's prey for it. Only cutting off the arm or leg that was bitten can save you. But a stick won't bite unless you touch it. Other things in the Blight will."

They traveled the next hour without incident, until they saw a tree whip suddenly back and forth, then bend down, flailing at the ground. A shrill scream pierced the early afternoon. The tree sprang back, now upright with its limbs entwined around a dark, writhing mass that spat and screamed.

Mat swallowed hard and tried to edge his dun away, but there was no real escape when trees stood trembling on every side. The dun rolled her eyes so the whites showed all the way around. Mat was soon in a solid knot of horse flesh as everyone else tried to do the same as he.

"Keep moving," Lan commanded, drawing his sword. The warder wore steel-backed gauntlets now, and his grey-green scale tunic. "Stay with Moiraine Sedai." He pulled around, not toward the tree and its prey, but in the other direction. With his color-shifting cloak, he was swallowed by the Blight before his black stallion was out of sight.

"Close," Moiraine said. She did not slow at all, but she motioned the others to huddle nearer to her. "Stay as close as you can." No one needed any further urging.

Something roared in the direction Lan had gone. It beat at the air, and the trees quivered from it. When it faded away, it seemed to echo still. Again the roar came, filled with rage and death.

"Lan," Nynaeve said. "He—"

The awful sound cut her off, but there was a new note in it. Fear. And then it was silent. Gone.

"Lan can look after himself," Moiraine said. "Ride, Wisdom."

The warder re-appeared, holding his sword well clear of himself and his mount. Black blood stained the blade, and steam rose from it. He wiped the

blade carefully with a cloth he took from his saddlebags, examining the steel to make sure he had gotten every spot. When he dropped the cloth, it fell apart before it reached the ground, even the fragments dissolving.

Moiraine shook her head. “It should not have been willing to come so close to one who touches the True Source.”

“Perhaps the Blight also knows a Web is forming in the Pattern,” said Lan.

“Hurry.” Moiraine dug her heels into Aldieb’s flanks. “We must get through the forest by dark, and out of the Blight by dark tomorrow.”

And they did. They camped that night atop a hill just outside of the southern edge of the diseased wood they had been riding through. From high ground, they could see a network of lakes to the west, the waters glittering darkly in the slanting sunlight. In the distance, circled by the lakes, stood jagged-topped hills, thick in the creeping shadows of evening. For one brief instant the sun’s rays caught the shattered tops, and Mat’s breath got stuck. *Not hills. Towers. The broken remnants of seven towers.* The shadows swallowed the shapes again quickly. Mat looked over at Lan— *the Last Lord of the Seven Towers*— but his face was as stony as ever.

“Couldn’t we camp down by the lakes?” Nynaeve asked, patting her face with her kerchief. “It must be cooler down by the water.”

“If I could stick my head in one of them,” Mat said, “I might never take it out.”

Just then something roiled the waters of the nearest lake, the dark water shimmering as a huge body rolled beneath the surface. Length on length sent ripples spreading, rolling on and on until at last a tail rose, waving a point like a wasp’s stinger at least five spans into the air. All along that length fat tentacles writhed like monstrous worms, as many as a centipede’s legs. The creature slid slowly beneath the surface and was gone, leaving only the fading ripples.

“Hmm,” Mat said flatly. “Not quite what I meant by, ‘I might never take it out.’”

“I will set guarding wards around this hill,” Moiraine said. She and Lan had already dismounted. “A true barrier would draw attention like flies to honey — attention we do not want. But the wards will alert me should any shadowspawn or creature of the Dark One come within a mile of us.”

Mat and Perrin helped Lan unsaddle and hobble the horses while the others began setting up the camp. Close up, the stoniness of Lan’s face could not hide his exhaustion. *Even bone-tired, he’s worth any fighter I ever heard tell of. Here’s hoping Moiraine saves him every time he’s hurt.* This brought his mind to Rand, a thought he’d tried to push away all day. He looked at his friend, the odd boy from the Westwood, the boy Mat had never much cared for until he’d cared for Mat when he needed it most. Loial had taken Rand from the stallion’s back and laid him down gently, face up on a bedroll. Only the slow rise and fall of his chest gave sign that he lived. He even looked as pale as a dead man, or close to.

Mat took his saddle over where the others were already lined up, set it down, and unfastened his saddlebags and blanketroll from the cante. He turned back and stopped with a tingle of fear. The ogier and the women were gone. So were all the wicker panniers from the packhorse, and the stove that Egwene had been setting up. The hilltop was empty except for evening shadows.

He turned to Perrin, who saw the same thing Mat did and already had his axe out. Mat looked down and saw his fingers wrapped around the hilt of the dagger from Shadar Logoth, ready to draw.

“Blood and bloody ashes,” he said softly to himself. *This thing is like a chain on my mind— and heavier every day.* He let go of the dagger, instead grabbing his staff from his things.

“Sheepherders,” Lan muttered. Mat was fairly sure the warder had said it with disdain, but the flatness of his voice allowed Mat to pretend it was

amusement instead. Lan crossed the hilltop unconcernedly and, at his third step, he vanished.

Mat and Perrin looked at each other with wide eyes— *why has no one explained how his eyes went yellow? why are we all fooling like they haven't?* — before darting for the spot where Lan had disappeared. Perrin stopped suddenly, then took another step when Mat ran into his back. Egwene looked up from setting the kettle atop the tiny stove. Nynaeve was closing the mantle on a second lit lantern. Lan was cleaning his sword again, Loial had taken out a book to read, Moiraine sat cross-legged by the fire. Rand was still lying on the blanketroll, dead to the world. Everyone was there.

Mat turned slowly to look over his shoulder. The hillside was there as it had been, the shadowed trees, the lakes beyond sinking into darkness. He was reluctant to back away from Perrin, afraid they would all disappear again. Perhaps next time he wouldn't be able to find them. He kept a hand on Perrin's back; he found this surprisingly comforting.

Moiraine noticed their confusion and a smile touched her lips. "It is a simple thing," she said, "a bending, so any eye looking at us sees around us, instead. Eyes that will be out there must not see our lights tonight, and the Blight is no place to be in the dark."

Mat still wasn't sure about the One Power, but that was right golden. His breath came a little more freely knowing they were unseen. He walked over to where Loial had laid Rand out and sat down at his head. Perrin sat by himself across the fire.

"Al' Thor," he said, "you ain't allowed to die. Not that you're thinking on it. Just... you know. Ain't allowed."

Egwene sat down next to him and set two mugs of tea between them.

"Doesn't seem right," she said. "It just... it doesn't seem right."

"The Aes Sedai said he'll be alright," Mat said. "Aes Sedai can't lie."

“Yes, but what she said— what she said exactly— was, ‘Rest is the only thing that can cure what ails him.’ She didn’t say it *would* cure him. Just that it *could*.”

“Oh.”

“What— what was it like when Master Merrill died?”

“Well, I ain’t seen it, exactly,” Mat said. “We were running, al’ Thor and I. He told us to run. He said— he took on a fade so we could run. It was…”

“And then you heard? You heard him scream as he— ”

“Aye. First, we saw him charge the fade. He ain’t had but two daggers, and he charged. Yelling, ‘Run!’ the whole bloody time.” Mat smiled a small, sad smile. “I actually saw him tackle the fade. Just ran him straight over. Yelling at us to run. ‘Run! Run!’” His smile faded. “So we did. And then we heard him… it was an awful sound, Egwene. For true, it was.”

Mat stared into the fire as they shared a silent moment. He felt it more than saw it when Egwene’s shoulders started shaking.

“What’s— ”

She threw her arms around his neck and sobbed silently, her whole body heaving as she did. It was unexpected, but not surprising. These past weeks had been hard and harrowing— more so than any of them had expected, even after the horror of Winternight. He wrapped his arms around her and let her cry awhile.

“I wanted an adventure from the stories,” Mat said. “This ain’t quite what I was thinking.”

He heard some laughter mixed in with the tears now.

“Me, too,” she said, and lifted her head up to look him in the eye. “Thank you, Matrim Cauthon. You aren’t quite what I was thinking, either.”

The firelight danced in her eyes, dewy with tears. Her hair was pulled back and tied, but a lock had pulled free in the front and now hung loosely along the right side of her face, framing it like a painting in her da's inn. Her full lips trembled. *Egwene al'Vere is pretty. Beautiful, really.* His eyes shot back up from her lips to her eyes. *Could get lost in those eyes.* He looked away, off to the right, and tried to clear his head. He had never thought of Egwene as a girl. Not like that, anyway. He met her eyes again; this time, it was she who looked away with flushed cheeks.

“Thank you, Mat.” Egwene turned back to al'Thor and pressed the back of her fingers to his temple and ran them back along his head and behind his ear. Then she took her tea, stood up, and walked over to where Nynaeve sat alone watching the fire spark.

Mat picked up his own mug and sipped at his tea, watching Egwene walk away.



They exited the forest midmorning, and the trees they saw now were more dead than rotten. But the first real sign that they were nearing the edge of the Great Blight was the return of a winter chill to the air. Egwene took her cloak from her pack and smiled as she wrapped it around herself.

“I never thought to miss the cold so,” she said. “It's... glorious.”

Lan stopped to throw an extra blanket on top of Rand, but otherwise they did not slow. The air got colder, the leaves got greener (if fewer), and the wind blew hard as they reached the foothills of a rocky, treeless mountain range. It was late afternoon when they first saw the towers.

Each watchtower stood tall atop a hill, half a mile from each of its neighbors, stretching from east to west as far as Egwene could see. A broad, walled ramp spiraled around each, making a complete circuit of the tower

by the time it reached the heavy gates halfway to the top. Mat asked Lan about their design. Egwene was only half listening when the warder explained how a sortie from the garrison would be protected but an attacking force would be exposed, or how large steel mirrors could catch sunlight and be used to pass signals from tower to tower, not just along the border but into the interior and ultimately to the heartland fortresses that would dispatch lances to turn back any raid.

“So have they seen us?” Egwene asked as they rode between the two closest towers. “I don’t see any flashing mirrors.”

“If they saw us, it was a good deal earlier than we saw them,” Lan said. “Any signal would have been passed on long before we reached the border.” As he said this last part, he placed his hand on a plain stone post and stopped. Moiraine pulled up alongside him.

“This was the border between Shienar and Malkier,” Moiraine said. “Now it is the border, more or less, of the Blight.”

The land wasn’t any different. The air wasn’t, either. But somehow, knowing that they had left the Blight made it all seem lighter, freer, cleaner. Egwene started to smile, but it died on her lips when she caught sight of Rand, thrown over his horse like a sack of grain. He still hadn’t awoken, or even moved.

The country here was rolling, forested hills. Most of the trees were grey skeletons clawing at the sky. Egwene spotted a few evergreens here and there, most of them covered with dead, brown needles.

For a while, Egwene and Nynaeve rode side by side, enjoying the quiet together. They had both changed and grown so much since leaving Emond’s Field, but Egwene still found a familiar comfort in Nynaeve’s presence. She liked to think Nynaeve felt the same about her.

At one point, Moiraine rode up next to Nynaeve. “Wisdom,” the Aes Sedai said in a low voice, “I was hoping we could speak for a moment.”

Distrust flashed on Nynaeve's face. "Aye, we're speaking. What do you want to talk about?"

"It is not so much what I would like to *say* as what I would like to *ask*," Moiraine said. "When we were in Baerlon, you and I talked about the boys, their lives and personalities. At the time, you seemed to be holding back, reserved in your answers. I was hoping you might be forthcoming after all that you have seen."

Nynaeve's face twisted up. Egwene, expecting a quick, typical rebuff, was surprised when Nynaeve offered quite a different response.

"Yes, Aes Sedai," said Nynaeve. "As I remember, you asked if any of the boys was born in the outlands. At the time, I didn't think it your business, or mine either, so I said nothing. But in light of what we all saw yesterday... Well, when I was born, Tam al'Thor had already been in the outlands for twenty years or so. He had run away in search of adventure when he was no older than the boys are now. I never knew him. So I remember clearly 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. That was Rand. Born in the outlands, but raised in the Two Rivers nearly from the day he was born. I don't see how it's important."

"Yes, yes," Moiraine said, "I see. Thank you, Wisdom. You are right, it is of no importance to you."

Egwene agreed. It was surprising to learn that Rand was not born in the Two Rivers, but it didn't change who he was. *Rand al'Thor is Two Rivers, through and through.*

"We are close to Fal Dara," Moiraine called over her shoulder as she returned to the head of the line. "Only a few miles more." In the distance, towers stood dark against the southern sky. Between the hills and the woods, the towers often vanished as they rode, only to reappear again when they topped a taller rise.

“Must have been an epic storm,” Mat said, pointing out a number of trees that had been split open by lightning.

“That was no storm,” Lan said. “That was just the cold. Winter here is so bitter, sometimes the sap freezes and the trees burst. You can hear them cracking like fireworks, and the air is so sharp you think that it might shatter, too. I don’t remember seeing so many in years past, though. This winter has been kind to no one, not even the trees.”

They may have crossed into Shienar, but they still saw no sign of any people. Lan said that no one wanted to live between Fal Dara and the border, exposed on one side to all the creatures of the Blight. For the first time, Egwene really understood the appeal of city walls.

The wilds seemed to end in a clear line, running left and right out of sight, beyond which were no trees or bushes, just low-cut grass.

“This clearing stretches one mile in every direction from the Fal Dara wall,” Lan said. “Nothing can come close to the city without being seen. There’s nowhere to hide.”

Another fifteen minutes brought them a stone’s throw from the town gate. Fal Dara was not as big as Caemlyn, not close, but its wall was just as tall. *As tall as Caemlyn’s wall, but not near so pretty.* There was no grace the grim, grey stone, just solidity of purpose. Above them, atop the tall watchtowers, pennants whipped in the wind so wildly that Egwene could barely make out the black hawk sigil they all bore.

Lan tossed back the hood of his cloak and, despite the cold, motioned for the others to do the same. “In the Borderlands, no one may hide his face inside a town’s walls. It’s the law.”

“Are they all so nice to look at?” Mat asked with a nervous laugh.

“A halfman cannot hide with its face exposed,” Moiraine said.

Mat's grin slid off his face as he hastily pushed back his hood. Egwene did the same.

The town gates stood open, tall and covered with dark iron, but a dozen armored men stood guard in golden yellow surcoats bearing the same black hawk that adorned the flags. Each had a long sword on his back and another weapon on his hip, either a mace or an axe or a broadsword. Even the horses tethered nearby wore steel armor over their chests and necks and heads, all ready to ride at an instant. It was an intimidating display, but the guards waved and called out happily.

"Dai Shan!" one cried, shaking steel-gauntleted fists over his head as they rode past. "Dai Shan!"

A number of others shouted, "Glory to the Builders!" and, "*Kiserai ti Wansho!*" Loial murmured in surprise, then a broad smile split his face and he waved to the guards.

One man ran alongside Lan's horse a little way, moving easily despite his heavy armor. "Will the Golden Crane fly again, Dai Shan?"

"Peace, Ragan," was all Lan said, and the man fell away. The warder returned the guards' waves, but Egwene thought his face even grimmer than usual.

The streets here were crowded with people and wagons, but these were not the eager crowds of Caemlyn or the milling throngs of Baerlon. *Odd that the guards should be so welcoming and the people so...not.* The people they passed were packed cheek by jowl, with leaden eyes and blank faces. Carts and wagons jammed every alleyway and half the streets, piled high with jumbled household furnishings and overpacked chests with clothes spilling out. Egwene didn't see any children running around or playing, but she did see some sitting on top of those jumbled carts.

"Joyless younglings," said Nynaeve, following Egwene's gaze. "They are even more silent than the adults."

At least the animals— shaggy cattle on rope leads, black-spotted pigs in makeshift pens, chickens and ducks and geese in wooden crates— were making themselves heard. Indeed, they seemed determined to make up for the silence of the people.

Lan led the way to the fortress in the middle of the town, a massive stone pile atop the highest hill. It had a dry moat, deep and wide, its bottom a forest of steel spikes that looked taller than Rand and sharper than razors. From one of the gate towers an armored man called down, “Welcome, Dai Shan.” Another shouted to the inside of the fortress, “The Golden Crane! The Golden Crane!”

Once they were through the gates, Lan swung down out of his saddle and signaled the others to dismount. Egwene walked alongside Rand’s bay, and Mat alongside the packhorse.

The courtyard was a huge square paved with big stone blocks. The towers and battlements surrounding it were just as fierce as those on the city’s outer wall. If not quite as crowded as the streets they had just passed through, the courtyard was busy in its own right. Hammers clanged at half a dozen smithies, and a steady stream of boys ran with new-made horse shoes for the farriers. Fletchers sat making arrows; every time they filled a basket, a boy whisked it away and replaced it with an empty one. And armored men and horses were everywhere.

No women here, nor girls, either. Egwene thought of the Maidens of the Spear that Elyas had told them about and had to tamp down her annoyance. *As if women, who do fine weaving and sewing and pottery, could not make arrows as good or better than men. As if a girl couldn’t run shoes from the smith to the stable.*

Grooms— also all boys and men— appeared, quick and eager and smiling in black-and-gold livery. They took all the horses but Rand’s, whose groom was at a loss over what to do with the unconscious rider until Loial lifted Rand gently and cradled him in his arms, carrying him the rest of the way.

In the center of the courtyard stood a man in the closest thing to finery Egwene had yet seen in this city. He was in plate-and-mail and leather, like the other guards, but also wore a bright yellow cloak edged in red over his armor, with the familiar black hawk on the breast, and a yellow surcoat bearing a grey owl. He wore no helmet and had his head shaven except for a topknot tied with a leather cord.

“It has been long, Moiraine Aes Sedai,” the man said with a bow. “And it is always good to see you, Dai Shan. Very good.” He looked at Loial and bowed again, murmuring, “Glory to the Builders. *Kiserai ti Wansho.*”

“I am unworthy,” Loial said, his voice stiff with formality, “and the work small. *Tsingu ma choba.*”

“You honor us, Builder,” the man said. “*Kiserai ti Wansho.*” He turned back to Lan. “Word was sent to Lord Agelmar, Dai Shan, as soon as you were seen coming. He is waiting for you. This way, please.”

They followed him into the fortress along drafty stone corridors. The halls were stark except for the simple but colorful tapestries and long silk screens of hunting scenes and battles.

“And how has the winter treated Shienar, Ingтар?” Lan asked quietly.

“As it is everywhere, we hear— a little worse than usual. The raids continued through the winter, even in the hardest of it. But it was no worse here than anywhere else along the Border. They still harass the people in the night, but what else can be expected come spring? Not that this is much of a spring. Scouts who return from the Blight— and too few do— come home with news of trolloc camps. Always fresh news of more camps. Many of the people who normally live outside the city walls are here now, seeking protection from the shadowspawn.”

“Yes,” Lan said, “we saw how crowded the streets were.”

Ingтар nodded but said no more until they reached a double door at the end of the hall with a soldier on either side.

“Lord Agelmar’s study,” he said as the guards opened the doors. Ingтар straddled the threshold and bowed to each of them as they passed through, then disappeared behind the doors as the guards swung them shut.

The study was as functional and plain as all the rest of the fortress. The outer wall’s only decorations were its arrowslits. The thick doors had arrow piercings, too, and were bound by heavy iron straps. The room’s only tapestry completely covered one of the inner walls. It showed men, armored like those in the courtyard outside, fighting halfmen and trollocs in a mountain pass.

The room had almost as little furniture as decoration— just a table, a chest, and a few chairs. Of course, there was a wall rack for weapons— two swords, a mace, and a long, kite-shaped shield bearing three foxes. A second rack displayed a complete suit of armor, arranged as one would wear it. *This entire city is built for war and battle.*

At the table, an older man studied a jumble of maps and papers, all weighted down with inkpots crammed with pens. He stood to greet them, and Egwene could see right away that he was a lord— so graceful and assured. Not that she had ever met a lord before. But he certainly seemed so, in a fine blue velvet coat and soft leather boots. And though his clothes did not speak of battles, he had a topknot like Ingтар— only white— and a face as hard as Lan’s. *He is just as much a warrior as he is a lord.*

“Peace, but it is good to see you, Dai Shan,” the lord said, his brown eyes smiling. “And you, Moiraine Aes Sedai, perhaps even more. Your presence warms me.”

“*Ninte calichniye no domashita, Agelmar Dai Shan,*” Moiraine said, an easy affection and warmth in her voice. “Your welcome warms me, Lord Agelmar.”

“*Kodome calichniye ga ni Aes Sedai hei.* Here is always a welcome for Aes Sedai.” He turned to Loial. “You are far from the *stedding*, ogier, but you honor Fal Dara. Always glory to the Builders. *Kiserai ti Wansho hei.*”

“I am unworthy,” Loial said with a bow. “It is you who does me honor.”

Lord Agelmar rang a brass bell on the table, and the doors opened. Servants in black and gold came in with folded cloths, damp and hot, for wiping the dust from their faces and hands. Others brought mulled wine and silver bowls of dried plums and apricots. Lord Agelmar pulled one aside and directed him to have rooms and baths prepared.

“A long journey from Tar Valon,” he said. “You must be tired.”

“A short journey by the path we traveled,” Lan said, “but more tiring than the long way.”

Lord Agelmar looked puzzled but did not ask about it further. “Well, a few days’ rest will put you all in fine fettle.”

“That would be most appreciated, my Lord,” Moiraine said. She nodded toward Rand, held limply in Loial’s arms. “One of our party was grievously wounded and needs to rest now that the Healing is done.”

“Of course, of course, Aes Sedai,” he said with a frown. “Though you come to my door under grave circumstances, it is for me a happy occasion. Moiraine Sedai, I have no right to ask it of you, but your abilities could be of great service to Shienar just now. The shadowspawn have been amassing all winter in the southern parts of the Blight. I fear we stand headed for a mighty clash, and you would be worth a thousand lances in Tarwin’s Gap. And you, Dai Shan. A thousand men *will* come when they hear the Golden Crane flies once more.”

“The Crane will fly no more,” Lan said, “and it has no spears left to summon. Malkier is dead, and the few of her people remaining are scattered across the earth like seeds by the wind. I am just a warder now, Agelmar, sworn to the Flame of Tar Valon. Let the Black Hawk be the bird to rally the lances now.”

“Be not so quick to dismiss what your name and banner still mean here, Dai Shan. The people are hungry for hope. And it is not Shienar alone. Kandor,

Arafel, Saldaea— the trollocs raided them all straight through the winter. We have not seen the like since the Trolloc Wars. I have never seen raids so fierce, or so large, or that press home so hard. Every king and council is sure a great thrust is coming out of the Blight, and every one of the Borderlands believes it is coming at them. None of their scouts report trollocs gathering beyond their borders, as we have here, but they believe, and each is afraid to send fighting men elsewhere. Shienar will ride to Tarwin's Gap alone, and we will be outnumbered at least ten to one, at least. But you, Dai Shan. You can change that.

“The Golden Crane banner in the van would put heart into men who know they ride north to die. Whatever you say, you are a Diademed Battle Lord of Malkier. The word will spread like wildfire, and though their kings have bid them hold where they are, lances will come from Arafel and Kandor, and even from Saldaea. Though they cannot come in time to stand with us in the Gap, they may yet save Shienar.”

“Rest easy, old friend,” Moiraine Sedai said. “We come from the Blight, not Tar Valon. We have seen the trolloc army, and we have broken it. You need not fear this imminent offensive. It will not come. In fact, I daresay you need not worry about any incursions for some time. The enemy will need to... regroup. To rally. I should not wonder to see spring finally arrive in earnest.”

“But— but how— ?”

“Even one as experienced as yourself might be surprised at what the One Power can accomplish, my Lord,” Moiraine said with a smile.

Lord Agelmar studied her a moment, looking half grave and half puzzled, then did something Egwene did not expect at all. He laughed, as loud and heartfelt a laugh as she could remember. Once he started, he couldn't stop. His whole body shook with it. *His face may be as hard as Lan's, but I can't imagine Lan ever laughs like that.* Egwene even started to giggle herself.

“You have the truth of it there,” he finally said when his laugh died down to a chuckle. “Should I live to be three hundred, Aes Sedai would never stop

surprising me. But, of course, I will not live to be three hundred, nor likely even a quarter of that. So when I get such news from the Blight, such wonderful, stunning, unforeseen news, why we simply must celebrate.

“Uno!” he called, summoning a soldier from his place in the doorway. Egwene tried not to stare, but she had never seen a face so scarred, with long-healed gashes running down from just below his topknot and straight through his left eye, which he covered with a patch. Maybe it was the scars — maybe the masked the man’s true humor— but Uno’s mood seemed a stern and severe mirror to his lord’s jubilation.

“Uno,” Lord Agelmar said, “on the morrow we shall have as great a feast as we can provide in these lean times. A feast for dinner, and in the morning, games. The city is teeming with people. Surely there must be some rated archers and staff fighters, wrestlers and runners. We have been waiting on some real signs of spring to have Bel Tine. Well, spring could not announce itself any more boldly than with the breaking of a trolloc army on our doorstep.”

Uno walked out to the hallway and started giving quiet orders to the servants there, still seemingly unmoved by Lord Agelmar’s good cheer. Egwene, though, found it contagious. She’d had no more of a Bel Tine than the Shienarans had. It hadn’t struck her until now just how much of an emptiness that left in her. The prospect of finally celebrating spring properly had her grinning wide.

“But that is for the morrow. Tonight we shall sup, break our bread and share our wine, and revel that we are another day outside the Shadow. Come, tell me how you came to be in the Blight, and of how you defeated the shadowspawn.”

With that they adjourned from the study to a small chamber down the hall, though Loial did not join them at first. Instead he carried Rand to the room the Shienarans had given him and put him to bed. When he returned, Egwene caught his eye and, with an arch of her brow, asked how Rand was.

Loial smiled and gave a slow nod. Egwene exhaled, then took a deep breath. *He's alright. For now, he's alright.*

The room where they ate was as stark and plain as the study. Its tables and chairs had the same look as everything here: well-made, but simple to the point of being severe. A big fireplace kept the room warm while servants brought soup and bread and cheese. The talk was of books and music until Lord Agelmar realized the Emond's Field folk were not talking. He started asking gently probing questions designed to bring them out of their quiet. It put Egwene in mind of how Papa would speak to guests at the inn back home.

Soon the boys were competing with each other to tell about the Two Rivers. Egwene even got sucked into it, but Nynaeve sat in silence as she ate her food and drank her wine. Lord Agelmar whispered to one of the servants, and while others cleared the table that man vanished and returned with a canister and a handful of clay pipes. "Two Rivers tabac," the Lord of Fal Dara said as he filled his pipe. "Hard to come by, here, but worth the cost." He puffed on his pipe with a look of deep satisfaction. Lan joined him in his smoke, as did Mat.

When the pipes came to Loial, the ogier refused. Lord Agelmar eyed him closely. "You seem troubled, Builder," he said. "Not beset by the Longing, I hope. How long have you been away from the *stedding*?"

"It is not the Longing; I have not been gone such a time as that." Loial shrugged, and now he did fill a pipe. He paused to light it, puff a few times, then draw deeply. "I expected— hoped, at least— that the grove would still be here. Some remnant of Mafal Dadaranell, at least. But I've seen no sign."

"*Kiserai ti Wansho*," Lord Agelmar murmured. "The Trolloc Wars left nothing but memories, Loial, son of Arent, and people to build on them. They could not duplicate the Builders' work, any more than I could. The making of such intricate curves and patterns is beyond human eyes and hands. Perhaps those people knew that a poor imitation would only have

been an ever-present reminder of what we had lost. There is a different beauty in simplicity, in a single line placed just so, a single flower among the rocks. The harshness of the stone makes the flower more precious. We try not to dwell too much on what is gone. The strongest heart will break under that strain.”

Egwene looked at Loial to see how he would answer, but it was Lan who spoke next, his voice as soft as she had ever heard it.

*The rose petal floats on water.
The kingfisher flashes above the pond.
Life and beauty swirl in the midst of death.*

“Yes,” Lord Agelmar said. “Yes. That one has always symbolized the whole of it to me, too.” The two men bowed their heads to one another.

Poetry from Lan? Every time Egwene thought she had the size of the man, he revealed some hidden dimension she could never have foreseen.

Loial nodded slowly. “Perhaps I also dwell too much on what is gone. And yet, the groves were beautiful. So they say.” His voice still carried a sadness, but his wide eyes had a look of wonder and appreciation as he surveyed the stark, simple room. *It’s like he’s seeing it for the first time, again.*

Ingтар appeared then and bowed to Lord Agelmar. “Your pardon, Lord, but you wanted to know of anything out of the ordinary, however small.”

“Yes, what is it?”

“A small thing, Lord. A stranger tried to enter the town. By his accent, I’d name him a Lugarder. When the North Gate guards tried to question him, he ran away. He was seen to enter the forest, but only a short time later he was found scaling the wall.”

“A small thing!” Lord Agelmar’s chair scraped across the floor as he stood. “Peace! The tower watch is so negligent a man can reach the walls unseen,

and you call it a small thing?"

"It was indeed a lapse, my Lord. But if you speak to him, you'll see that he is a madman. They say the Light shields such. Perhaps the Light cloaked the tower watch's eyes and allowed him to reach the walls. Surely one poor madman can do no harm."

"Has he been brought to the keep yet?" Lord Agelmar asked, plainly still dissatisfied. Ingтар nodded. "Good. Bring him to me here. Now." Ingтар bowed and left, and Lord Agelmar turned to Moiraine. "Your pardon, Aes Sedai, but I must see to this. Perhaps he is only a pitiful wretch with his mind blinded by the Light, but two days gone, five of our own people were found in the night trying to saw through the hinges of a horse-gate. Small, but enough to let trollocs in. Darkfriends, no doubt, though I'm loath to think it of any Shienaran. They were torn to pieces by the people before the guards could take them, so we'll never know for certain. If Shienarans can be darkfriends, I must be especially careful of outlanders in these days. If you wish to withdraw, I will have you shown to your rooms."

The joy that had filled the room a few moments ago had disappeared completely.

"Darkfriends know neither border nor blood," Moiraine said. "They are found *in* every land and are *of* none. I, too, am interested in seeing this man. The Pattern is forming a Web, my Lord, but its final shape is not yet set. It may yet entangle the world, or unravel and set the Wheel to a new weaving. At this point, even small things out of the ordinary can change the shape of the Web."

Lord Agelmar bowed his head slightly. "As you wish, Aes Sedai."

Ingтар returned with two guards escorting a man who looked like a ragbag turned inside out. Grime layered his face and matted his scraggly, uncut hair and beard. He hunched into the room, though Egwene guessed he would be a tall man if he stood at his full height. His sunken eyes darted this way and that. A sharp, rancid smell wafted ahead of him.

Egwene leaned forward, trying to see through all the dirt.

“You’ve no cause to be holding me like this,” the filthy man whined. “I’m only a poor destitute, abandoned by the Light and seeking a place, like everyone else, to shelter from the Shadow.”

“The Borderlands are a strange place to seek—” Lord Agelmar began, when Egwene recognized the scar on the ragged man’s cheek.

“The peddler!” she interrupted.

“Padan Fain,” Perrin agreed, nodding.

“You know him? Well,” Lord Agelmar said slowly “perhaps this concerns you after all, Moiraine Sedai.”

Moiraine nodded. “I greatly fear that it does.”

“I didn’t want to.” Fain began to cry fat tears that cut runnels in the dirt on his cheeks. “It made me, with its burning eyes.” The boys both sat up then, and Egwene saw Mat slip his hand under his coat. “It made me its hound! A hound, to hunt and follow with never a bit of rest. Only its hound, even after it threw me away.”

“This does concern us all,” Moiraine said grimly. “Is there a place where I can talk with this man alone, my Lord?” Her mouth tightened with distaste. “And wash him first. I may need to touch him.” Lord Agelmar nodded and spoke softly to Ingтар, who bowed and disappeared through the door.

“There is a misunderstanding here, Great Lord.” It was the peddler’s voice, from the peddler’s mouth, but he sounded like a different man. A haughty snap had replaced his whining and tears. He stood upright, as tall as Egwene remembered him, and faced Lord Agelmar as if they were equals, as if the men at his sides were his own bodyguard rather than his captors. “I am sometimes taken by spells, but that will pass soon.” He flicked his fingers against the rags he wore. “Do not be misled by these, Great Lord. I have had to disguise myself against those who have tried to stop me, and

my journey has been long and hard. But at last I have reached lands where men still know the dangers of Væ'alza, where men still fight the Dark One."

"So you've come here because we fight trollocs," Lord Agelmar said. "And you are so important that someone wants to stop you. These people say you are a peddler called Padan Fain, and that you are following them."

Fain hesitated, his eyes darting all round the room. He looked at Moiraine for only the briefest moment, but his gaze lingered on the Emond's Fielders. Egwene felt hate in that look, and fear. Finally Fain settled his eyes on Lord Agelmar. "Padan Fain is simply one of the many disguises I have been forced to wear over the years," he said, his voice calm again. "Friends of the Dark pursue me, for I have learned how to defeat the Shadow. I can show you how to defeat him, Great Lord."

"We do as well as men can," Lord Agelmar said dryly. "The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills, but we have fought the Dark One since the Breaking without peddlers to teach us how." He turned to Lan. "He thinks a great deal of himself for a peddler. I think Ingtar is right. He is mad."

Fain's eyes tightened, but his voice remained smooth. "Great Lord, I know my words must appear grandiose, but if you will only—" He cut off abruptly, stepping back as Moiraine rose and started slowly around the table. Only the guards' lowered glaives kept him from backing right out of the room.

Moiraine made her way around the table, pausing to put a hand on Mat's shoulder and whisper a few words in his ear. Whatever she said seemed to relax him; the tension left his face and he took his hand from under his coat. The Aes Sedai went on until she stood beside Lord Agelmar, confronting Fain. The peddler sank into a crouch once more.

"I hate it," he whimpered. "I want to be free of it. I want to walk in the Light again." His shoulders began to shake, and tears streamed down his face even more heavily than before. Egwene's mind scrambled for some way to explain what she was seeing, something other than the obvious. She remembered Thom Merrill's words. *He was always one to carry bad news*

quickly, and the worse, the faster. Fain is more raven than man. “It made me do it,” the peddler finished.

“I am afraid he is more than a peddler, Lord Agelmar,” Moiraine said. “Less than human, worse than vile, more dangerous than you can imagine. I believe we shall skip the bathing. Best that no one touch him, and we have not the time, anyway. Come, Lan.”

Of Malkier

A restless itch crawled its way up and down Nynaeve's body. She'd felt on the verge of sicking up since the clash at the Waygate. It wasn't just the foulness of the Blight forest, though that didn't help. No, it was that she had channeled the One Power. The Aes Sedai had told her that she could, that she had already done so, but this was the first time she had channeled and known it. She had *felt* it. And it felt... *good*. That she had enjoyed that foulness coursing through her being, that was what had her belly roiling for more than a day.

That, and what had provoked her channeling. *Lan*. The man drove her mad, but she could not deny it now: he set her aflutter and aflame. The feelings she had silently mocked in girls back home now filled her own heart.

Nynaeve had never concerned herself much with men. She had always been a plain girl; men rarely paid her much attention. And when they had, all she had seen were Uncle Idris's eyes when he touched her. She'd smelt his foul brandy breath when he kissed her, and felt his rough and loveless hands when he bent her child's body over and broke her open, worked her till her privates were raw and sore. So men had never held much interest for her.

Until now. Why? Had something in her changed? Was there something different about Lan? Clearly, he was the first warder she had met, but that was not the sort of distinction Nynaeve was like to look on with favor. He wasn't particularly handsome, with his stone face and eyes of ice. He had certainly not done anything to charm her or win her affections. So why did she react almost by reflex when she saw him hurt? Racing down to him, cutting his attackers down with the One Power, challenging the fallen

trollocs to show her more— she didn't even remember making those choices. It had felt as natural as breathing.

Nynaeve didn't know why. That ignorance and the shame of having channeled had worked themselves into the restless itch now wriggling its way from head to toe. She tried to distract herself by following the children's conversation.

"What else could it be?" asked Mat.

"He's right," Egwene said. "The only way he could have been clearer is to say, 'I am a darkfriend, sworn to the service of the Dark One.'"

"Aye, that's as may be," Perrin said with a sigh, "but I still hate to think it. He came to the Two Rivers as often as any outlander."

"Well, we'll learn soon enough," Mat said. "Maybe he knows about our dreams. About why the Dark One wants us." He looked at the other two. "What? He knew the name Væ'alza. Where else have you heard that name besides our dreams?"

"Moiraine knows that name," Perrin said.

"And she's Aes Sedai. Whatever Fain is, he ain't no Aes Sedai."

Not so long before, such open talk of the Dark One would have drawn Nynaeve's ire. No better way to get its attention than to talk about it. Now she barely noticed. Thoughts of her own darkness occupied her mind.

Looking for something else to distract her, she turned her eyes to Loial. The ogier had stood up after Moiraine left and walked around the room, studying the walls. Now he was almost pressing his face against the stone while he gently traced a particular join with his long fingers. Sometimes he closed his eyes, as if feeling the join was more important than seeing it. Nynaeve was wondering what he sensed in the stone to so capture his attention when the ogier turned to Lord Agelmar, who stood near the fire, silently watching the entire room.

“I see this castle as if with new eyes, my Lord,” Loial said. “I still wish I’d had the chance to see that ancient ogier stonework, but I am glad to see the simple beauty you humans have been able to create.”

“You show us too much honor, Builder,” Agelmar said. “But it is good to hear that, even within the reach of the Great Blight, we have managed to make something the Builders can appreciate.”

“Shienar is quite different from the other lands I have visited, my Lord. Every country has its own dress, its own food, but Shienar’s personality seems rooted in the old ways more than any other I have seen.”

“Yes, I should say so,” Agelmar said, “for we are still fighting the war other lands try to forget. It is so throughout the Borderlands.”

“Yes. The war, the battle. I notice that everyone here calls Lan ‘Dai Shan’ — battle lord. How did he come by that name? It seems that there is much more to our warder friend than we could ever guess.”

“Aye,” Mat broke in. Nynaeve noticed now that the children had stopped talking and were now listening to the ogier and the lord, just as she was. “I heard Moiraine call him the last Lord of the Seven Towers, and you say he flies a golden crane banner. Who is Lan, anyway?”

Nynaeve began studying her cup intently. Her search for talk to distract her from thoughts of Lan had been worse than futile.

“Lord of the Seven Towers,” Agelmar said with a frown. “An ancient title. Not even the High Lords of Tear have older, though the Queen of Andor comes close.” He heaved a sigh and shook his head. “He will not speak of it, yet the story is well known throughout the Borderlands. He is a king, or should have been, al’ Lan Mandragoran, Lord of the Seven Towers, Lord of the Lakes, crownless King of the Malkieri.” His shaven head lifted high, and the face that had shown sadness and regret a moment before now shone with pride. His voice grew stronger, filled with the force of his feeling. The whole room could hear without straining. “We of Shienar call ourselves Bordermen, but fewer than fifty years ago, Shienar was not truly of the

Borderlands. North of us, and of Arafel, was Malkier. The lances of Shienar rode north, but it was Malkier that held back the Blight. Malkier, Peace favor her memory, and the Light illumine her name.

“Lan, whom you know as a warder, is the son of al’ Akir Mandragoran, last crowned King of the Malkieri. How did he become as he is? The beginning, perhaps, was Lain. Lain Mandragoran, brother to the king. They two were as close as brothers could be, as close as twins even after the royal ‘al’ was added to Akir’s name. But Lain’s wife, Breyan, burned with envy, unable to accept that al’ Akir had been raised to the throne instead of Lain.

“Breyan dared her husband to lead his lances through the Blight to the Blasted Lands. She hoped that a great enough victory would put her husband above her king. It was a foolish hope. Lain was well acclaimed for his deeds, a hero in everyone’s eyes, but he could never have outshone al’ Akir. He was, man and king, such as comes once in a hundred years, if that. Peace favor him, and el’ Leanna.

“But, being brave and not knowing of his wife’s true motives, Lain accepted the dare with a laugh. Lain led his lances through the Blight to the Blasted Lands, perhaps to Shayol Ghul itself. He died there, along with most of the men he commanded— men Malkier could ill afford to lose.

“Her plot had proved disastrous for Malkier, but Breyan blamed the king. She said Shayol Ghul itself would have fallen if al’ Akir had led the rest of the Malkieri north with her husband. For revenge, she plotted to seize the throne for her son, Isam. She took Cowin Gemallan, called Cowin Fairheart, as her lover, and together they moved soldiers back from the Blight to seize the Seven Towers. That left Borderfort garrisons bare as a late winter cupboard.

“With the Borderforts weakened, trollocs flooded into Malkier. Together, King al’ Akir and Lain might have rallied the land. They had done so before. But Lain’s doom in the Blasted Lands had shaken the people, and the trolloc invasion broke the Malkieri’s spirits and their will to resist. Overwhelming numbers pushed the Malkieri back into the heartland.

“Breyan fled with her infant son Isam, but trollocs overtook her. One snatched the babe from her arms, ripped the child in two, and began eating him in front of his mother. A Malkieri lance brought the trolloc down before it could do the same to Breyan. She was saved, and brought to Arafel.

“In time, Breyan Mandragoran stood trial, and when the depth of her treason was revealed, many called for her head. But Arafel’s king instead doomed her to live, to live with all that her selfishness had cost her. They say that she cut her own heart out within the year, crying that she had already seen her heart torn in two.

“But that was later, after the Seven Towers had been broken. When the trollocs poured past the empty Borderforts, al’ Akir knew that Malkier was doomed. He had no time to gather aid from Shienar or Arafel, and his own armies could not hope to stand alone. Not with five thousand lances dead in the Blasted Lands and the Borderforts overrun.

“Al’ Akir and Queen el’ Leanna had Lan brought to them in his cradle. Into his infant hands they placed the sword of Malkieri kings, the sword he wears today. A weapon made by Aes Sedai during the War of Power, the War of the Shadow that brought down the Age of Legends. They anointed his head with oil, naming him Dai Shan, a Diademed Battle Lord, and consecrated him as the next King of the Malkieri. In his name they swore the ancient oath of Malkieri kings and queens: ‘To stand against the Shadow so long as iron is hard and stone abides. To defend the Malkieri while one drop of blood remains. To avenge what cannot be defended.’” Agelmar’s face was as hard as Lan’s ever was, and he spoke as if he, too, had sworn that oath, or one much similar. “Old words for an old world.”

Nynaeve tried to imagine Lan as a babe, holding that same sword, having those words sworn above him. It should have been silly, a laughing matter. But it was clear that Lord Agelmar told the unvarnished truth, and Nynaeve frowned to think of all that Lan had lost.

“El’ Leanna placed a locket around her son’s neck, for remembrance, and the infant, wrapped in swaddling clothes by the queen’s own hand, was given over to twenty chosen from the King’s Bodyguard, the best swordsmen, the deadliest fighters. They were to carry the child to Fal Moran, capital of Shienar, while the rest of Malkier’s swords went to meet the Shadow.

“Al’ Akir and el’ Leanna led the Malkieri that day, and died alongside their people. They died at Herat’s Crossing, and the Seven Towers were broken. Shienar and Arafel and Kandor met the halfmen and the trollocs at the Stair of Jehaan and threw them back, but not back all the way. Most of Malkier remained in trolloc hands, and year by year, mile by mile, the Blight has swallowed it.” Agelmar sighed. When he went on, Nynaeve could hear that pride in his voice again.

“Only five of the Bodyguards reached Fal Moran alive, wounded all, but the child was unharmed. From the cradle they taught him all they knew. He learned weapons as other children learn toys, and the Blight as other children their mother’s garden. The oath sworn over his cradle was graven in his child’s mind. As a man, he finds himself with nothing left to defend. But he can avenge. Lan denies his titles, yet in the Borderlands he is called the Uncrowned, and if ever he raised the Golden Crane of Malkier, an army would come to follow. But he will not lead men to their deaths. In the Blight he courts death as a suitor courts a maiden, but he will not lead others to it.

“If you must enter the Blight, and with only a few, there is no man better to take you there, nor to bring you safely out again. He is the best of the warders, and that means the best of the best.”

Nynaeve stared into her cup. ‘*He courts death as a suitor courts a maiden.*’ *How sad to have something to die for but nothing to live for.* She thought of what it would feel like to *be* that something that Lan lived for. Her mouth curved in a slow smile, but she swallowed it quickly when the man himself appeared in the doorway with Moiraine right behind him.

Nynaeve turned away and felt her face flush so hot that she half thought she had fallen headfirst into the fire.

“What did he say?” Mat said, getting up from his chair. He had a nervous energy about him, anxious and edgy.

“Country oaf,” Agelmar said softly into his chest. Nynaeve couldn’t help but smile at that, though the boys had more reason to be anxious than the Lord of Fal Dara knew. Raising his voice to a normal tone, Agelmar said, “Did you learn anything, Aes Sedai, or is he simply a madman?”

“He is mad,” Moiraine said, “or close to it, but there is nothing simple about Padan Fain. It seems he put us all on the path we have been running on since Winternight.”

The Peddler's Tale

Few people could be found in the back ways they took, which Moiraine supposed was all to the good. Better not to expose anyone to Fain's filth unless necessary. She could not say for certain, but she suspected that his heart and mind were so foul and debased that his mere presence could corrupt an ordinary person. She thought she and Lan should be safe, but worried about the guards and Ingtar.

No one spoke as they walked, but the peddler filled the silence with a wordless whine punctuated by a few muttered declarations of his own innocence here and there— declarations to which Moiraine gave very little credence. They had descended well below the keep when they stopped at a heavy, iron-strapped door with a small iron grill set in it. A clapper hung below the cross-hatched bars, and an ill-lit passageway stretched behind it.

Ingtar lifted the clapper and clanged the iron three times, clear and loud. Even the moaning, muttering peddler fell silent as that sound rang out, reverberating for long seconds through the chambers and corridors of the lower levels. A top-knotted soldier came to the door and looked through the grill, first at Ingtar and then at the two guards. He gave a gruff grunt before slamming the bolts back and yanking the door open.

“Ho, Changu,” Ingtar said.

“Ho, Ingtar,” the guard said, eyeing the bundle of soiled rags that was Padan Fain. “What's this then? And why does he need such an escort?” His eyes finally fell on Moiraine and he quickly blanked his face and bowed his head. “Aes Sedai.”

Moiraine gave him a slight nod. Past Changu sat another guard, sharpening a dagger at a small table with a lamp on it. He did not look up, nor even pause as he ran the edge of his blade against a stone in long, slow strokes.

“This man is a darkfriend and a prisoner,” she said, returning her gaze to the first guard. “I require a room in which to question him, and so here we are. Will this place suit my needs, or have I been misled?”

“No, Aes Sedai,” Changu said. “This will suit you well and fine, of course.” The second guard looked up then, just for a moment, before he returned to his sharpening.

The first guard led them down a wide hall with flat iron grills to either side, fronting stone-walled cells, only two of which held prisoners. The captives sat up on their narrow cots, shielding their eyes with their hands as the light struck them. She could see their eyes peering out between their fingers, glittering in the lamplight.

When they reached the end of the hall, Changu led them into the last cell on the left. He took their lamp and hung it on an iron hook on the wall, and pulled a cot out of the darkness of the opposite corner. He nodded to Ingтар and returned to his post.

Ingтар threw Fain roughly onto the cot and locked his hands in shackles that hung from chains on the wall. Then he drew his sword and made a show of cleaning it as he leaned against the wall near the hook that held the lamp. It was a bit heavy handed, but Moiraine did not object. If it scared Fain to silence, she could always play the protector and ask Ingтар to step outside.

“Hello, peddler,” she said. “I never got to see you in the Two Rivers. I heard tell you had perished in the attack.”

“No, no, no,” Fain said. His eyes did not meet hers, but rather darted restlessly from point to point on the wall. “Not Fain, no, my Lady.” He looked at her then. “And you are a lady, aren’t you? Highborn. I can smell it on you.”

“Highborn or low, it is of no consequence, Master Fain. I am not a lady, but a sister, an Aes Sedai of the Blue Ajah.” She extended her hand to show her Great Serpent ring, and the peddler shrank back against the wall. “You know what I am, then.”

“There— there’s been a misunderstanding, my Lady,” Fain said, his eyes now trained on the floor between his feet. “You know by now that the Great Lord has had me in its snare, yes it has. Been so these forty long years. It won my allegiance with promises of a different world, where men and women were not bound by the Pattern of the Great Wheel, where they were finally free to reach their potential. Promises of heaven for a boy from Lugard.”

“But now you have forsaken those promises, forsaken your Great Lord of the Dark. You are ready to take up arms against your former master, yes? This is what you would tell me?”

When he looked up at her, his eyes were dark and cold and burning. “You don’t know what it’s done to me. What it’s taken. What it’s . . . put inside of me.”

“Tell me. Convince me that you— an avowed darkfriend— are not a threat, though you seem to have hunted us along a long and dangerous path these several weeks.”

“I was not always as you see me now.”

She believed that, if nothing else he said. Filthy as he was, she could see that he was a handsome man, or would have been after a long bath. He was so defiled that the corruption radiated from him, but from the shape of it, the smell, she could make out the same inner charm and presence that must have drawn the Shadow’s forces to the peddler in the first place. No, he had not always been as he was just then.

“And how were you before? *Who* were you? You say that you have served your master for two score years. That cannot be less than most of your life.

Why should what you were— or were not— as a boy weigh in your favor now?”

His lip curled in a flash of a snarl before he assumed his meek posture again. *His façade begins to crack.* She had decided early that he was too foul to trust. She hoped here not to cement him as an ally, but just to glean what information she could from his account. He could well lie, but even lies could point the way toward the truth.

“It may be as I’m not the boy I once was, but neither am I now the man I have been for most of my life. Not anymore. But I don’t know what I am now. It used to be... *simpler.*”

“Simpler how, peddler?”

Fain winced and rubbed his temples. “I was still a lad when I came to the Great Lord. Not much past twenty, young and brash and angry. The world spits on Lugarders, you know, and Lugarders spit on southside Lugarders. I was dead sick of it, and looking for a way out. I took to peddling, but met little success. The countryside was crowded with other men hawking their wares, many of them already well known to the people. I was nigh ready to give up when I met a man called Denair. Said he had a lot of friends, all over the land, that could give me custom. All I had to do was tell him what I saw when I was out in the world.

“And I saw plenty. Once it was yielding coin, peddling kept me busy and out of Lugard for much of the year. I made my way over the whole of the continent. I met Denair’s friends, and they gave me good custom. *Great* custom. Men gave me money; innkeepers gave me mead and brandy; I never had to pay a farrier or cobbler; and the women— beautiful women—they were keen to trade what I wanted for what I had to offer.

“Soon I was a part of Denair’s sticky spider web myself, and counted most of my friends among those who could say the same. These people were wild, see. They were *free*. Cared nothing for convention, or tradition, or the cages of our parentage. I’d never seen the like. I wanted to know what was different about these folk, and soon enough I learned: they were

darkfriends. When they invited me to join them, I didn't take much convincing. They said the Great Lord— what you lot call the Dark One—the Great Lord's not evil. No, it just means to break the invisible chains as bind us all. When you strike at the chain of a shackled beast, it can easily mistake your act of friendship for one of aggression. The Great Lord meant to see us free, not dead or enslaved or whatever else. Well, I didn't need to hear any more. I was in. All in. Like I said, things were simpler."

Fain went on to tell all he had done in service to the Dark One. It started out harmlessly enough— dozens, scores, hundreds of reports to Denair about the villages he visited. Playing courier for important items or intelligence. Introducing some of the people he met to Denair. But years went by and Fain grew older and colder, and his deeds grew colder still. He'd salted land and poisoned wells, kidnapped people, and ultimately killed. Fain often did not know the reasoning behind the commands he was given, but Moiraine saw the pattern clearly enough. His actions were targeted, designed to disrupt markets or politics, or to punish. Fain's Great Lord was a great fan of punishment.

But none of this was particularly shocking, and it did not explain the deep sense of foulness, of *wrongness*, that seemed to emanate from the peddler.

"You say the Dark One has done things to you," she said, "taken things from you. Put things inside of you. None of what you have said thus far sounds like much more than any darkfriend's tale. What are you not telling me, peddler?"

"I hide nothing," Fain said. "We just haven't reached that part of the story yet. It started three years ago, when a halfman came to me in Hinderstap, up near the Murandy-Andor border. Well, I never had such a visit. It was terrifying— even for a Friend of the Dark. But it was also quite thrilling. I was summoned, you see. Summoned to Shayol Ghul. That summons was no blessing, though. Not in the least."

Fain stopped, seeming unsure what to say. He opened his mouth several times as if about to speak, then closed it again having said not a word. "The

halfman brought me north to the Blight,” he finally said, “and in Shayol Ghul I met a man with eyes of fire, who named himself Væ’alza. You know that name?” Moiraine nodded. When Fain continued, his voice was changed, as if it were coming from afar— not from his throat, but from somewhere miles deep within him. “The burning, Aes Sedai. The flames were not only in Væ’alza’s eyes. They were everywhere. They were inside *me*. They blazed like a prairie fire in the heart of a drought.” His voice began to crack and choke up. “They burned until there was near nothing left of me inside. I was a shell, and they filled me with something new, or very old, I know not. Something to help me... help me hunt.”

Fain screamed then, as if he felt that fire again, burning him from within. For the first time, he strained against his chains, trying to will himself free of them. Moiraine was no Yellow sister, but she was an able Healer for a Blue. As foul as he seemed, she laid one hand on his head and the other on his knee. She Delved him and her eyes went wide. *He is the same as—*

Fain thrashed his head free of Moiraine’s touch and screamed again.

“The burning! It was cool water compared to what Væ’alza put in me. A hunger, a yearning, to find a boy, likely in Andor. But no one knew who he was. That’s why Væ’alza needed a hound. To sniff out the boy.”

“Why? Why all this trouble for a single boy, peddler?”

“They never— I never knew. Just that there was a boy to be found, before it was too late. Though I did hear... No one said this to *me*, you see, but I think there was something special about his eyes. No idea what, though. I think there was a dark prophecy. But none of that mattered, don’t you see? All that mattered to me was finding the boy. Tracking him down. I was not a man anymore. I was a hound.”

“And why you? Why did the Dark One choose you for its hound, Master Fain?”

Fain screamed again, straining and arching his back as if having a fit. After half a minute with no sign of stopping, Moiraine put her hands back on the

peddler and tried to Heal him of this bout of fits. When she did, she felt the same thing she had before. For some reason, Fain felt like Mat. Not that one could be mistaken for the another. But there was something similar, something shared.

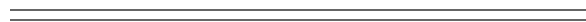
The peddler was breathing hard and heavy, as if he had just run a long sprint. “Why you?” Moiraine asked again.

“Never knew that, either. Only that they had reason to believe he lived in the area where I did my peddling. Near Baerlon and thereabouts. I searched every village, every hamlet, every farm. Aaarrrrrh!”

The screaming started again. Moiraine calmed him again with her Healing. And he told her more, until the screaming started again. The cycle repeated again, and again, and again. Moiraine knew he could never be fully Healed of what ailed him, that she was doing no more than taxing his mind and body further. But he had information she needed, and she was not feeling particularly merciful.

Finally, Fain simply passed out from pain and exhaustion. Moiraine rose and turned around. She nodded at Lan, then started back toward the heavy, iron-strapped door.

“Come, Ingтар,” she said, “show me back to the children. We have much to discuss.”



Perrin remained in his chair, but he understood why Mat would be too anxious to stay seated. They already thought Fain might know why the Dark One was hunting them, which one of them it was after. Now it seemed he was a *part* of that hunt. *If he knows about the Dark One, could he know about the wolves? Could he have answers for me?* However many times he asked himself these questions, his answer never changed. The Dark One

hated wolves, and the feeling was mutual. If Fain was with the Dark One, his secrets did not include Perrin's... *gift*.

One of the black-and-gold-liveried servants bowed his way in with a blue washbasin and pitcher, a bar of yellow soap, and a small towel on a silver tray. Moiraine directed him to put them on the table as another servant brought her some wine. "Your pardon for commanding your servants, Lord Agelmar," she said. "I took the liberty of asking for this."

Lord Agelmar nodded to the servant, who put the tray on the table and left hurriedly. "My servants are yours to command, Aes Sedai."

Moiraine poured some water into the basin. The rising steam said the water was just off the boil, but it didn't seem to bother Moiraine as she pushed her sleeves up and started scrubbing her hands vigorously.

"I said before that he was worse than vile," she said. "That does not come close to the truth of it. I do not believe I have ever met someone so abject and debased, yet at the same time so foul. I feel soiled from touching him, and I do not mean for the filth on his skin. Soiled in here." She touched her breast. "He is something worse than a darkfriend."

"He looked so pitiful," Egwene said absently. "I remember him arriving in Emond's Field each spring, always laughing and full of news from outside. Surely there's some hope for him. Don't they say, 'No man can stand in the Shadow so long that he cannot find the Light again'?"

"I have always believed it so," Moiraine said, toweling off her hands. "Perhaps, with enough time and love, Padan Fain could be redeemed. But he has been a darkfriend for more than forty years, and the things he has done for that, in blood and pain and death, would freeze your heart to hear. Not least of these to you, I suspect, is that he brought the trollocs to Emond's Field."

Looking around at the other Emond's Fielders, Perrin saw in their eyes a reflection of his own shock.

“Fain brought the trollocs,” Egwene said, sounding as if she were rolling the words around in her mouth, trying to see if they tasted true or not.

“But— but didn’t he lose everything in the attack?” Nynaeve asked. “His cart and all?”

“Did he bring any here?” Mat asked. His voice was half growl, and his hand slipped under his coat as it did whenever he was agitated now. He looked at the stone walls around them and shivered. “Did he bring any halfmen?” Perrin remembered Mat and Rand’s tale of the myrddraal in Whitebridge and shivered himself. As much as they’d been through, the thought of a single halfman still chilled the heart.

“If he did,” Lord Agelmar said with a laugh, “they’ll break their teeth on the walls of Fal Dara. Many others have before. And do not worry yourself about halfmen, either.” Mat’s face reddened as he sat back down. “Every street and alley in Fal Dara is lit by night. And no man may hide his face inside the walls.”

“But why?” Egwene asked. “Why would Master Fain do that?”

“Three years ago—” Moiraine stopped to sit down. She looked as exhausted from her conversation with the peddler as she had after the fight before Shadar Logoth. “Three years this summer. As far back as that. The Dark One was in motion while I still sat planning in Tar Valon. For three years has Padan Fain been hunting the boys for the Dark One.”

“That— that’s mad,” Mat said. “Fain, he’s come into the Two Rivers every spring, regular as a clock. Three years? We’ve been right there in front of him, and he never looked at any of us twice before last year.”

“Three years ago, Fain was called to Shayol Ghul itself, where a creature in a man’s skin and with eyes of fire, who called itself Væ’alza, took him. Changed him. Reshaped him in fire and pain.”

Perrin shifted in his chair but said nothing. He looked at Mat, who looked back with eyes that asked how it could have been any other way. Perrin had

no answer.

“They almost killed him then, and then it almost killed him to tell me, to bring it all out from wherever he had hidden it. Even with my Healing he is a shattered ruin. A ruin, but alive. They did not kill him.

“He was, as he said, made the Dark One’s hound. Væ’ alza transformed him, made him both more and less than he was so it could set him to hunt. The making of those changes, the things that were done to him, this is what it frightens Fain to remember. And as much as he fears his master, just as much does he hate it for what it has done to him.

“When it was done, the halfmen sent Fain out on his mission. The Dark One knew roughly where to find what it sought, but not much better than we in Tar Valon. So Fain was sent sniffing and hunting through all the villages around Baerlon, and all the way to Paerish Swar— The Darkwood — then down to the Taren and across into the Two Rivers.”

“Three springs ago?” Perrin said slowly. “I remember that spring. Fain came later than usual, and then he lingered on. It was awful odd, really. He ain’t leave for a whole week or more, just idle and gnashing his teeth about laying out money for a room at the Winespring.”

“Aye, Fain likes his money,” Mat said. “I remember, now. Everybody wondered, was he sick? My sister thought maybe he was lovestruck over a local woman but I couldn’t see it. What Two Rivers woman would carry on with a peddler? Well’s to make time with a Tinker.” Egwene shot him a look like poison. “What?” he asked, shrugging his shoulders and grinning his most innocent grin.

“After that, Fain was taken to Shayol Ghul again, and his mind was... distilled.” The Aes Sedai’s face twisted in a rare show of feeling. Perrin thought of how apples became apple brandy and almost pitied Fain the loss of his mind. “What he had perceived with his new hound senses was somehow concentrated and fed back to him. He did not understand what was happening— or at least could not communicate it clearly to me— and I do not know nearly enough about how the Dark One’s powers work to

guess at how it was done. When he entered the Two Rivers the next year, he was able to choose his targets out more clearly. Indeed, more clearly even than the Dark One had expected. Fain knew for a certainty that the one he sought was one of three in Emond's Field."

"Oh, fuck all," Mat said.

"Matrim Cauthon!" Nynaeve smacked her hand on the table. "That is enough!"

"Oh, bugger that, Wisdom," Mat said, raising his own voice. "Come scold me when *you've* found out the Dark One has been hunting *you* for three years."

Perrin raised an eyebrow at that and looked at Egwene, whose eyes were wide in shock. Perrin had never heard anyone talk to Nynaeve like that. He braced himself for her answer, but Moiraine went on as if neither of them had spoken, except for maybe raising her voice a tiny bit. No one interrupted the Aes Sedai.

"When Fain returned to Lugard, Væ'alza came to him in a dream. Fain abased himself and performed rites that would strike you deaf to hear the half of them, binding himself even more tightly to the Dark One. Sometimes, what is done in dreams can be more dangerous than what is done in the waking world. The Dark One promised Fain great rewards, power over kingdoms after its victory, and told him to mark the three he had found when he returned to Emond's Field. A halfman would be there, waiting for him with trollocs. We know now how the trollocs came to the Two Rivers. There must have been an ogier grove and a Waygate at Manetheren."

"The most beautiful of all," Loial said, "except for Tar Valon. The ogier remember Manetheren quite fondly." Lord Agelmar raised his eyebrows in wonder and formed the name with his mouth silently: *Manetheren*.

"When the myrddraal failed at Emond's Field, it brought Fain with its trollocs and followed our trail. The fade would not let Fain ride. It made

him run on a leash, like a true hound, and the trollocs had to carry him when his feet gave out. They talked so that he could understand, arguing about the best way to cook him when his usefulness was done. Fain claims he turned against the Dark One then, before they even reached the Taren.

“When we escaped across the river, the myrddraal took the trollocs back to the closest Waygate, in the Caladaice, and sent Fain across the Taren alone. He thought he was free then, but before he reached Baerlon another fade found him. That one was not so kind. It made him sleep doubled up on himself in a trolloc kettle at night, to remind him of the price of failure. Fain hunted for the boys in Baerlon, and he found two of them”—Mat slapped both hands on the table and whistled—“but we were gone by the time he could bring the trollocs. It was they who burned down The Stag and Lion.

“His new halfman master used Fain until they reached Shadar Logoth, meeting up with other fades and fists along the way. What I did there, sending an illusion of our tracks and smell off toward the mountains, fooled the myrddraal, but not Fain. He told them what he sensed, but they did not believe him, dragging him behind them on his leash. Only when they could not catch us up, no matter how hard they pressed, did some begin to credit him. Those were the four halfmen who returned to Shadar Logoth with their trollocs. Fain claims it was Væ'alza itself that drove the myrddraal.”

Lord Agelmar shook his head. “Pah! The man is lying or mad. If Heartsbane were loose, we'd all of us be dead by now, or worse.”

“Fain spoke the truth as he saw it,” Moiraine said. “He could not lie to me, though he tried to hide much. As he saw it, ‘Væ'alza appeared like a flickering candle flame, vanishing and reappearing, never in the same place twice. Its eyes seared the myrddraal, and the fires of its mouth scourged us.’”

“Well, *something* drove four fades where they were loath to go,” Lan said, “a place they fear almost as much as they fear the wrath of the Dark One.”

Lord Agelmar grunted as if he had been kicked; he looked sick.

“It was evil against evil in the ruins of Shadar Logoth,” Moiraine continued, “foul fighting vile. When Fain spoke of it, he whimpered through chattering teeth. Many trollocs, including the one that held Fain’s leash, were slain, consumed by Mashadar and other things.

“Fain believed he was finally free. He meant to hide in Shadar Logoth until all the trollocs left— which figured to be shortly, given how much they hated that place— and then run until Væ’ alza could never find him again. To the ends of the earth if necessary. He hid in the dark corners of a ruined building, where he found a vest of chain mail. He put it on and cowered there until the city lay silent.

“Here is where Fain became something different, worse, fouler yet than a darkfriend remade as a hound. That vest of mail was infused with the same evil that poisons Matrim’s dagger”— their eyes all went to Mat, and when he looked down to find his hand under his coat once again, he let out a string of curses that no glare from Nynaeve could stop— “and the peddler is now sicker than Mat ever was. The foulness of Shadar Logoth has mixed with that of the Dark One, though they be as fire and water to one another. Instead of killing Fain, the vest’s poison is twisting him every day into something ever less human. His flesh has begun to grow around the links of the mail vest, so that it is fused to his body, a part of him.

“I think the vest, as much as it has defiled him, has also set him free of the Dark One. Even he does not realize how. He is his own hound now. But a hound still needs to hunt.

“When Fain finally left Shadar Logoth, he ran to get as far from halfmen, trollocs, and Emond’s Field folk as he could. Imagine his horror when he discovered that the pull that our three boys have on his mind did not wane with his new freedom. No, it only grew stronger and sharper with every day that passed. It became so strong that he could not eat until he found you. He lived on what he could scavenge— beetles and lizards snatched while he ran, half-rotten refuse dug from midden heaps in the dark of night. He could not rest until he found you. He stopped only when exhaustion collapsed him like an empty sack, and then drove on again as soon as he had strength to

stand. By the time he reached Caemlyn, he could *feel* his quarry— even when it was a mile away. Here, in the cells below, he would sometimes look up without realizing what he was doing. He was looking in the direction of this room.”

Perrin had a sudden itch between his shoulder blades; it was as if he could feel Fain’s eyes on him then, through the stone floors that separated them.

“If Fain was half mad by the time he reached Caemlyn, he sank even further when he realized that only two of those he sought were there. He was compelled to seek out the missing boy, but also to stay and follow the two he had already found. He was caught in an impossible position, and his mind broke further under the strain. He stayed in Caemlyn, and even found one of you in the city, but could not catch him. Since this was during Mat’s illness, I must assume it was Rand.”

“Rand’s beggar!” Loial said.

“Yes,” Moiraine said. “Yes, that makes sense. Eventually, the third boy, Perrin, joined the others in Caemlyn. Fain rejoiced then, though his joy was short lived. He spoke of screaming when he felt the three of you disappearing into nothingness. He followed his hound’s nose till he found the Waygate. He screamed again. The knowledge of how to open it was in his mind, though he does not remember learning it. His hands moved of their own accord, burning with the fires of Væ’alza when he tried to stop them. When the owner of the shop came to investigate the noise, Fain murdered him. Not because he had to, but out of envy that the man could walk freely out of the cellar while his own feet carried him inexorably back into the Ways.”

“Fain followed us through the Ways,” Perrin said, shaking his head.
“Alone.”

“The Ways?!” Lord Agelmar broke in. “But the Ways have been closed these ten centuries, black with death and madness. You cannot possibly have—”

“Yes,” said Moiraine, nodding grimly, “the Ways. The darkest path that we might avoid the darkest days. And Fain followed. But it was little to him. He would follow you three into the grave. He must. It is a compulsion beyond his power to control.”

“Then Fain was the one following us,” Egwene said. “How did he escape the— the Black Wind? It was right behind us at the Waygate.”

“He escaped, and he did not,” Moiraine said. “The Black Wind caught him — and he claimed to understand the voices. Some greeted him as like to them; others feared him. No sooner did the Wind envelop Fain than it fled.”

“*Machin Shin* fled from *him*.” Loial’s whisper rumbled like a giant bumblebee as he shook his head in disbelief.

“What exactly *is* the Black Wind?” Egwene asked.

“No one knows exactly,” Loial said. “Something left from the Time of Madness, perhaps, or the War of the Shadow. Maybe something hiding in the Ways so long it can no longer get out. No one, not even among the ogier, knows how far the Ways run, or how deep. It could even be something of the Ways themselves. They are living things, you know, and all living things have parasites. Or it might be a creature of the corruption itself, something born of the decay. Something that hates life and light.”

“And the peddler understood it, and frightened it,” Perrin said, shaking his head now, too.

“After we exited the Ways,” Moiraine continued, “Fain stayed free of the battle and then simply followed the boys’ trail here, to Fal Dara. That brings us to the present moment, though I believe Fain is still hiding something. The evil goes deeper in him, and stronger, than in any man I have yet met. He begs sanctuary, but I dare not trust him. He is spoilt, through and through.”

“What do you reckon he’s hiding, Moiraine Sedai?” Mat was on the edge of his seat again. “Could he know something about this bloody dagger,

something that could help me break free of it?”

“Whatever he is hiding, we will never know it now.”

“What does that mean?” Mat asked. His tone gave the question a hint of accusation. “What does that *mean*, Aes Sedai?”

Moiraine just looked at him calmly, saying nothing. Her face was a mask, betraying no thought or emotion.

“Where— where’s Lan?” asked Egwene.

Everyone looked around. *He ain’t come back with her.* Mat stood up and dashed to the door so quickly he knocked his chair over. Perrin, Egwene, and Nynaeve all looked at each other before standing up to follow, then stopped where they were when the door opened. Lan had finally joined them.

“Where have you been?” Mat asked, now sounding very much like he was making an accusation.

Lan looked at Moiraine, who gave him a short nod. “The peddler had no more knowledge he was willing to part with.”

“No!”

“Take a care with that hand, farm boy.”

Mat looked down, where his hand was holding that dagger beneath his coat again. Perrin let out a breath. *Every time.*

Mat sank to his knees. “I’ll never be free of this thing.”

Nynaeve turned on Moiraine. “How could you? Whatever else he was, he was helpless and pitiful and locked in a dungeon.”

“He was no such thing,” Moiraine said. “To take on faith that a creature who has been touched by such powers can ever be wholly helpless would

be foolhardy in the extreme, Wisdom.”

“You *killed* him! Worse, you had Lan do it for you, so the blood is on *his* hands. A coward’s command.”

Perrin’s mouth hung open. Talking so to an Aes Sedai was madness. He looked at Egwene, hoping for some kind of help in calming the situation down. Egwene’s mouth hung lower than his own, but it was not Nynaeve who had shocked her. Egwene’s eyes were fixed on Moiraine and filled with fear. *And you wanted to be Aes Sedai.* His eyes darted quickly between the Wisdom and the Aes Sedai, then he stepped square between them.

“Aes Sedai?” came a voice from the doorway. Everyone turned to find a servant who quickly gathered that he had just stepped into a room he did not want to be in.

“Yes?” Moiraine said.

“M’ lady, you asked us to let you know when the boy stirred. He stirs now.”

“He is awake?”

Perrin and Egwene shared a look of hope and fear.

“Not exactly, m’ lady. He tosses about, moaning. But I think he will wake soon, or never again.”

A Dream of Dragonmount

The dead lay everywhere. Men and women and children, most mutilated or burnt, looked at the man with empty eyes as he wandered the halls. Seeing their faces, he felt like he should know them, but they were strangers to his mind. When he tried to remember their names, he realized he had lost his own. *Something is wrong.* The unease growing in his belly was in part a reaction to the sweet and burnt and sickly smell filling the hallways, but the main of it was something else. *Why can I not remember what happened? where I am? **who** I am?*

He felt just on the verge of understanding, his toe on the line between confusion and comprehension. He tried to think it through, but it was hard to focus. His mind felt slow and heavy; his clearest thoughts were largely wasted on awareness of the burning pain in his shoulder, where a sizable gash was already starting to scab over. Try as he might to grab it, memory remained just out of reach.

The place was no more— or less— familiar than the dead who filled it. He knew these walls; well scorched now, he was sure they had been covered in murals before. He could not recall what the murals showed, but he remembered the feeling of looking at them— a nervous, overwhelmed, transcendent quiver stretching from privates to throat. Now, the paint was blackened and blistered and cracked. No one would feel the artists' love and pain, their bitterness and joy, ever again.

Not everything was ruined, though. Here and there, the odd colorful tapestry or painting hung undisturbed. In some rooms, finely carved

furnishings, inlaid with ivory and gold, stood untouched, or lay intact but toppled where rippling floors had overturned them.

What is this place?

He looked for someone who could help him remember, who could explain the situation, but the only people he saw would never explain anything again. Every now and again he heard screams or sobs coming from afar. The first few times he tried to track down the source, but he just ended up even more lost than before in those charred and tangled halls.

He stopped when he caught his reflection in a mirror hanging askew over bubbled marble. His clothes were ragged and thick with dust, but he thought they must have been quite fine once, in grey and scarlet and gold. His face was covered in the same grime as his garments. Trying to wipe it off seemed only to move it around. His cloak was ready to fall to the floor in pieces, held up only by a round brooch. He considered the brooch more closely. It was well made, and looked pristine, for all that the rest of him looked ratty. The design seemed... *important*— a circle, one half white and the other black, a sinuous line separating them. *Where do I know that symbol from? It means something.* It made him think of balance, which was funny, as he felt completely off balance at the moment.

He walked the halls and checked the rooms, finding many dead but none living. All seemed familiar, but they brought him no closer to remembering anything of substance. He felt better when he went out on the grounds. At least here, the trees and grass and flowers were alive. That is, where they had not perished in fire. Here and there a stump stood near the center of a circle of ash, or an entire tree trunk lay split open after falling to lightning. But many plants had survived unscathed, which was more than he could say for people.

He had circled the main garden and walked the entire arcade around one of the courtyards when he heard a low moaning from nearby. At first he thought it was the sound of wind blowing through the gardens, but the air was as still as the bodies littering the grounds. He followed the sound until

he found a woman on a patio, leaning against the palace wall, huddled under her cloak.

“Sister,” he said as he knelt down beside her. “Sister, are you hurt?”

She turned toward him, her eyes glassy and distant. He lifted her cloak. Her hands were trying with little success to keep her insides from pouring out of a gaping wound in her belly. The large shard of glass that had torn her open was still lodged inside of her. He felt compelled to pull it free, but he dared not for fear of accelerating her bleeding.

“How did this happen, sister?” he said, putting his hands on top of hers to help with her vain effort. “How long has it been like this?”

Her eyes finally focused on him and registered his presence. She smiled— a soft, kind smile that he felt his own face mirroring. She was quite beautiful, with perfect skin, high cheekbones, and striking eyes of different colors, one silver and the other a coppery amber. Her skin was the color of dark caramel, and her curly hair was all the colors of a sunrise after the storm has passed.

“My Prince of the Dawn,” she said softly, slurring her words together. “You have come for me. You never...” She trailed off.

“Sister, do you know me?” the man asked. She had certainly sounded like she knew him, but he knew that, with so much lost blood, it could just be delirium.

“Lews,” she said, “do you not even know me? My body is broken, and now, so too is my heart.”

“I am sorry, sister. Take no offense— I know my own name no better than I know yours. Do you know what happened here? How did everyone— how did you get hurt?”

“It rained fire,” she said, “a storm of destruction like none I have ever seen. It could only have been the Power. The rumors are true. Some of the men

are going mad and attacking.”

Madmen wielding the Power? That would explain this nightmare. He did not know what rumors she spoke of, but he thought he should. He thought he *did*, but it stayed just beyond his reach.

“The Dark One could not destroy us,” she continued, “but it will have us destroy ourselves.”

The Dark One. Was she— were *they*— somehow involved in the War of Power?

“What has the Dark One to do with us?”

“My Prince of the Dawn,” she said with a frown. “You really do not remember.”

“Help me remember. Who am I to you? How do you know me?”

She started crying then, or laughing. He was not sure which.

“I know you as no other,” she finally said. “I know you as a mother knows a child, as a sister knows a brother, as a woman knows her lover, as a girl knows her best friend. You are Lews Therin, named Telamon, named Dragon. You are my husband, and I your wife. But you do not remember.”

“I— I wish I could,” he said. *Lews Therin. Lews Therin.* “What is your name, sister? I mean, wife. I would know how to call you.”

“Ilyena,” she said. “Ilyena Moerelle Dalisar, though you always call me—”

“Sunhair.”

“Yes, Sunhair,” she said with a soft smile.

“I do not remember, but somehow... it fits.”

“It fits,” she said. She closed her eyes for a moment, just a few seconds, but long enough to have Lews Therin on the verge of shaking her, as if that would hold off death. Then she opened those marvelous, mismatched eyes and looked at him as if he had just arrived, a pleasant surprise in boring day. “Lews Therin, my Prince of the Dawn, sing me my song. Do not let me die in frightened silence.”

Song? He did not know any song. He could not remember ever having sung before, though of course he must have. “What— what song, Sunhair? I do not... I cannot remember.”

This time he was sure she was not laughing. Her shoulders shook in heaves and fits, and her sounds were quiet sobs, even if he saw no tears.

“Am I to die unknown to the one I love?” she said. “Is there a crueler death?”

He had no memory of this woman, but his heart began to break all the same.

She gathered herself and looked him in the eye. “No, my love. They may already have my funeral pyre lit, but I have enough left in me for this.” She slipped her hands free, covered in blood and whatever else was spilling out of her, and put them on Lews Therin’s temples. She closed her eyes and he felt a chill rippling through him like a gentle, pleasant wave on a warm day on the shore.

The wave that followed was not at all pleasant— a wave of knowledge, as Ilyena’s Healing weave tore down the blocks that the taint had built up in his mind. He suddenly remembered all he had forgotten, and it doubled him over in agony. He remembered calling down the fire. Sending lightning through all the halls of the palace at once. Opening gateways beneath people and dropping them into the sky overhead to fall to their deaths. Heating the air in the palace until the windows exploded outward, where the glass sank into the flesh of any unlucky enough to be nearby— like Ilyena. He had even unleashed balefire.

And the wave brought memories not just of what had happened, but of who he was. He remembered his life before the taint, before the war. He remembered parents and his older brother, the games they played as children and the rows they would have. He remembered the first weave he ever made— a simple thing that let him listen to his brother and his friends from afar. Most of all he remembered Ilyena. He remembered meeting her at the Academy. He remembered the half a year it took him to get her to say ‘yes’ to a meal with him, and the much shorter time it took for them to fall in love. He remembered how she made him feel back then— light and giddy and immortal, with endless possibility at his feet. He remembered the love and the pain, the failures and the bravery. He remembered the life they had built together, with the twins dancing at the front of his mind. Laelana and Airuni, who laughed like morning glories opening themselves to the rising sun, who reveled in discovering the world as it revealed itself to them.

Except they would never laugh again, or discover another something new. None of them would. *I did this. I killed them all.* He saw in his mind the face of every dead body he had passed by in ignorance that day. *My family, friends. The girls. I killed—* The memories that he had yearned for so desperately had returned as blades running through every part of his body.

“Ilyena!” he said, lifting himself back up and looking at his wife.

“You do remember,” she said, the slur now making her words almost unintelligible. “I knew you would. I am so glad to get to say...”

Her eyes closed. “No! No! Sunhair, no.” Lews Therin tried desperately to Heal her, but she was too far gone, and his talent in Healing too meager, for him to do anything but make her last thirty seconds of life slightly less painful. *She never even knew. She loved me at the end, not realizing that it was I who—*

She took her last breath, and Lews Therin Telamon howled in pain, a howl that slowly turned into a mad, manic laugh. He knew then that while his love had restored his memory, she had done nothing for his sanity. It did not

matter. He had nothing left to live for. In rage and self-loathing, he reached for *saidin*.

The air turned to fire, the fire to liquid light. The bolt that struck from the heavens would have seared and blinded any eye that glimpsed it for more than an instant. From the heavens it came, blazing through his body, boring into the bowels of the earth. Stone turned to vapor below him, and the mineral steam only burned him further. The earth thrashed and quivered like a living thing in agony. The shining bar connected ground and sky for a heartbeat at most, but after it disappeared the earth heaved like a sea in a storm. Molten rock sprayed five hundred feet into the air, swallowing Lews Therin, and the groaning ground rose, thrusting the burning fountain 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, and the earth's roiling dwindled to the occasional tremble. No sign of Lews Therin 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 before coming together again eight miles later, forming a long island in its midst.

And on that island sat the city of Tar Valon, and on the streets of Tar Valon stood Rand al'Thor. He was himself again after this dream that had seemed to last a lifetime, this dream of a memory that was not his own and yet somehow was. He looked up to where the peak of Dragonmount disappeared within some of the day's light cloud cover.

"So," a voice said quietly behind him. He turned to find a familiar figure wearing a fine lilac suit with a white shirt and a plum neckerchief. *Væ'alza*. "All these years of searching are come to an end. It is good to see you, old friend."



Rand sat up in bed, shivering and covered in sweat. He looked around. This was not the palace. This was...

“Who— what is this?”

“Rand, you are awake,” Moiraine said, sitting on a stool beside his bed. The way she was facing, it looked like she had been speaking to Lan, standing near the door, before Rand had woken up. “Excellent. It has been a long wait, and we have much to discuss.

“Tell me, what do you remember?”

The Eye of the World

“Moiraine Sedai?” Rand said. “Where are we?”

“We are with friends,” Moiraine said, “in a city called Fal Dara, in Shienar.”

“You’ve been unconscious for more than a day, sheepherder,” said Lan.
“Some were beginning to worry.”

“How— how did...?” Rand paused, feeling a bit lightheaded. “The battle, outside the Waygate.”

“Yes,” Moiraine said. “We battled outside a Waygate. What more can you remember?”

“I remember... I remember my sword. It was like it was made from light. Blinding light.”

No one said anything for a moment. “Anything else?” asked Moiraine.

“And... and lightning.”

“Do you remember anything about the Eye of the World?”

Rand tried to remember. *The rope. The rope between me and the Eye. That feeling, that power. The rope and the pulse. And then the sword of light, and the storm of lightning. Power flowing from the Eye of the World to me, through me. Power, flowing...*

“N-no,” he said. *That can’t be.*

“Hmm. Unfortunate. Well, since you were knocked out, we have been able to learn more about the Eye than we have ever known.”

Rand said nothing. He felt a fear growing in his chest, expanding until it threatened to fill his throat and stop his breath— fear of where this conversation was going. Fear of what the Aes Sedai was about to say.

“It seems that the Eye of the World is a relic from the time of the Breaking, the time when Aes Sedai first realized that the Dark One had tainted *saidin*. It was not then known that Lews Therin and the Hundred Companions had succeeded in resealing the Dark One’s prison. Indeed, many Aes Sedai thought the taint was proof that they had failed. Not realizing that the taint was permanent, they thought it an ongoing attack from the Dark One, touching the world from its still-weakened prison.

“They created the Eye to help them finish what Lews Therin had begun. It is a *ter’angreal*— do you know what that is?”

Rand shook his head. The fear was in his elbows and fingers.

“A *ter’angreal* is an object of the One Power, like an *angreal*, but each does just one specific thing. There is one in Tar Valon, for instance, that makes any oath sworn with it binding. Truly binding. The Eye of the World is a kind of *ter’angreal* called a ‘well’ — it stores the One Power. *Saidin*, specifically. What might be called the pure *essence* of the Power wielded by men before the Time of Madness.”

Rand swallowed hard. *The One Power. I— the One Power.* He felt a desperate urge to run.

“You see,” Moiraine continued, “the makers of the Eye planned to seal the Dark One’s prison with both male and female channelers. The greatest wonders of the Age of Legends were done in that way, with *saidin* and *saidar* together. But with the taint on *saidin*, the male Aes Sedai could not simply channel. They needed clean *saidin*. So a great many Aes Sedai, men and women, using methods long lost to us now, worked through the taint of the Dark One to clean it, to make it pure, knowing that doing so would kill

them. And they made the Eye of the World to hold it, so that male Aes Sedai could use it in one concentrated attack, with their sisters.

“Of course, it turned out that Lews Therin and his Hundred Companions *had* sealed the Dark One’s prison. The Eye was not needed, and besides, almost all of the male Aes Sedai had already died or gone mad from the taint. There was no one left to use it.

“One of the last male Aes Sedai, already quite mad, had a Foretelling before he died. He said, ‘The Dragon will one day return, and The Eye of the World will be the first eye he opens when he awakes.’ The few women left who were involved in this undertaking vowed to keep the Eye safe. They worked with some of the ogier Elders to hide it in the Ways, guarded by the last living dragon. Where the dragons had gone, we still do not know. In the Ways the Eye stayed, even after they had gone dark, until we found it.”

Rand’s mouth and throat felt like sand. He smacked his tongue against the back of his teeth, trying to work through the dryness. “How— how did you learn all of this? I mean, they’re all dead. Who told you all this?”

“Lan? Can you bring it over here, please?”

Lan picked up a leather sack from the floor near where he was standing and brought it over to the bed. He pulled it open; Moiraine reached inside and pulled out the gold-and-silver sphere they had found in the Ways, handling it carefully. Rand had not gotten a good look then, but now he could see that it was covered in some strange script.

“This writing is the Old Tongue,” Moiraine said, running her finger over some of it. “It tells the story of the Eye, everything that happened before they took it into the Ways. The Aes Sedai who helped make and hide the Eye of the World never shared their work with the rest of their sisters. The memory of it was lost to us. The few times that prophecies or Foretellings mentioned the Eye, most thought it just a cryptic metaphor.”

“B-but, what does this have to do with me?” He felt compelled to ask, though he could not imagine that the answer would offer any comfort,

whatever it was.

Moiraine took her hands away from the Eye. The two halves, silver and gold, separated. “The Eye of the World is open. ‘The Dragon will one day return, and The Eye of the World will be the first eye he opens when he awakes.’” She looked him dead in the eye and held his gaze with her own. “You channeled using the *saidin* stored in the Eye. You opened it. You, Rand al’Thor, are the Dragon Reborn.”

He scooted back until he was against the wall. “N-n-no. That’s not possible. I’m—I’m a farm boy, a farmer.” He turned to Lan but found no comfort in the hard face with the cold eyes.

“I had suspicions from the first,” Moiraine said. “Suspensions are not proof, though. I knew right away that you, Matrim, and Perrin were special. But I did not know for certain that any of you could channel, or that one of you was the Dragon Reborn. Then there was Bela.”

“Bela?” Rand said. *I can’t channel. I’m no Dragon Reborn. I’m Rand al’Thor. Son of Tam al’Thor. We’re just simple Two Rivers folk.*

The Aes Sedai nodded. “At Watch Hill, Bela did not need me to cleanse her of fatigue; someone had already done it. I believe she could have outrun Mandarb that night. I should have thought of whom Bela carried. With trollocs on our heels, a draghkar overhead, and a halfman somewhere in the night, how you must have feared that Egwene would be left behind. You needed something more than you had ever needed anything before in your life, and you reached out to the one thing that could give it to you. *Saidin*.”

He shivered. He felt so cold his fingers hurt. He thought of how Moiraine Sedai knew that Egwene could be so important to him: the time she happened upon the two of them, half dressed, rolling around in the woods. It was mortifying. He took a breath. *This...this has to be the absolute stupidest thing I could be worrying about right now.* “If— if I never do it again, if I never touch it again, I won’t...” His voice died before he could say it: go mad. Turn the land and people around him to madness. Die, rotting while he still lived.

“But you already *have* done it again. I should have realized when we met again in Caemlyn. You told me of a lightning storm that allowed you and Mat to escape the darkfriend in Four Kings. That lightning that came exactly when you needed a way out. It created an exit for you and ended the men who chased you. *You* called that lightning down, with *saidin*.

“And you surely channeled again in the battle at the Waygate. The sword of light you created, the storm you brought down. You slayed an entire trolloc army.

“But perhaps you could decide to never channel again. It would be much easier were there someone to teach you, but it might yet be done, with a supreme effort of will.”

“You can teach me. Surely, you—” He stopped when the Aes Sedai shook her head.

“Can a cat teach a dog to climb trees, Rand? Can a fish teach a bird to swim? I know *saidar*, but I can teach you nothing of *saidin*. The only ones who could are three thousand years dead.”

Rand was silent for a moment. “The others!” he blurted out. “I mean, do they know? Did you tell the others?”

“No, only those who were apart from the battle and saw. Lan, of course, and Egwene and Nynaeve.”

“You didn’t tell them. Why didn’t you tell them? Shouldn’t you be looking to gentle me now? Isn’t that what Aes Sedai do to men who— who— men like me? You change them so they can’t do it anymore. You— you make them safe. Why aren’t you talking about taking me to Tar Valon to be gentled?”

“You are *ta’veren*,” Moiraine said, “and the Dragon Reborn, besides. I do not think the Pattern has finished with you yet.”

Rand sat up straight. “Wait— in the dreams, Væ’ alza said Tar Valon and the Amyrlin Seat would try to use me.” He had been terrified, but now he felt anger welling up. “He named names, and I remember them, now. Raolin Darksbane and Guaire Amalasan. Yurian Stonebow. Davian. Logain. Every one a *false* Dragon. Don’t try to deny it. Well, I won’t be used. I am not a tool you can throw on the midden heap when it’s worn out.”

“A tool made for a purpose is not demeaned by being used for that purpose.” Moiraine’s voice was as harsh as his own. “But a man who believes the Father of Lies demeans *himself*. You say you will not be used, and then you let the Dark One set your path like a hound sent after a rabbit by his master.”

“I am no one’s hound,” he said, his hands balled into fists. “Do you hear me? No one’s. And you don’t even know I’m the— the Dragon. Just because I can, you know, it doesn’t mean— ”

Moiraine reached back into the sack and pulled out a few items that Rand didn’t recognize.

“The Eye was hollow, but it was not empty. It held more than *saidin* within it.” She took a small cloth pouch and opened it, pouring a handful of pottery fragments onto the table next to the bed. They were black and white, shiny. They looked like some strange rubble to Rand, but she fitted them together deftly, making a perfect circle the size of a man’s hand— one half black, one half white, separated by a sinuous line.

“It looks like the Eye, but flat,” Rand said.

“Yes. It is the ancient symbol for the Aes Sedai. In the years after the Breaking, the halves were separated into two different symbols— the Flame of Tar Valon, and the Dragon’s Fang.” Looking at it now, Rand could see how the dark half formed the dragon’s fang, and the light part the flame of Tar Valon. Strange how it had never occurred to him that those symbols were at all connected.

She took the knife from her belt and handed it to Lan, nodding to the circle. The warder picked the largest piece and put it on the floor, kneeling down beside it. Then he raised the knife high and brought it down with all his might. A spark flew, the fragment leapt with the force of the blow, and the blade snapped with a sharp crack. He examined the stump left attached to the hilt, then tossed it aside. “The best steel from Tear,” he said.

Moiraine leaned over to pick up the fragment and handed it to Rand. He held it up and looked closely. It didn’t have a mark on it.

“*Cuendillar*,” Moiraine said. “Also called heartstone. No one has been able to make it since the Age of Legends, and even then it was made only for the greatest purpose. Once made, nothing can break it. Not the One Power itself wielded by the greatest Aes Sedai who ever lived, aided by the most powerful *sa’angreal* ever made. Any power directed against heartstone only makes it stronger.”

“Then how did— I mean, look at it,” Rand said.

“This”— Moiraine paused and took a breath, an effusive display of emotion for her— “this is, or was, one of the seven seals on the Dark One’s prison.” Rand dropped the piece as if it had become white-hot. Moiraine picked it up, then calmly began gathering the other fragments. She put them back in the pouch, which she returned to the leather sack.

Next she took something wrapped in a soft cloth and held it up as pulled the cloth away. It was a curled, gold horn. Despite its gleam, it seemed plainly made. The only markings were a line of silver script inlaid around the mouth of the bell.

“What’s that?” Rand asked.

“The script here is the Old Tongue, also,” Moiraine said. “*Tia mi aven Moridin isainde vadin*. The grave is no bar to my call.” She handed it to him, as gently as if it were a newborn baby.

“That’s— it’s not the Horn of Valere?” Rand asked, taking it from her. He handled it with as much care as the Aes Sedai had.

“Made to call the heroes of the Ages back from the dead to fight the Dark One.”

Rand ran his finger along the horn’s curves and edges, then handed it back to Moiraine. His hands were shaking. He had just touched the Horn of Valere. Moiraine wrapped it again and put it back in the sack. The third thing she brought out of the leather bag was a tightly folded bundle of white cloth. With some help from Lan, she unfolded it to reveal a long, white banner. Rand could only stare. The whole thing seemed of a piece, neither woven, nor dyed, nor painted. A figure like a serpent, with scales of scarlet and gold, ran the entire length. Its body was serpentine, but with scaled legs like a lizard, and feet with five long, golden claws on each. It had giant wings raised high. And the beast had a great head with a golden mane and eyes like the sun.

“What is it?” he asked, but he already knew the answer. This was the creature whose skeleton they had seen in the Ways.

Moiraine answered slowly. “This is the banner of the Lord of the Morning when he led the forces of Light against the Shadow. The banner of Lews Therin Telamon. The banner of the Dragon.”

No. “It’s not me,” Rand said. His head was light, and spinning. He had no idea when he’d eaten last, and he thought he might faint. *No.* “I’m not— it’s not me. It can’t be. You’ve made some mistake. You have the matter all twisted. I’m Rand al’Thor, son of Tam al’Thor. I’m a shepherd from the Two Rivers. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“Rand,” Moiraine said, “I am going to tell you a story, a story about my life that has become a story about your life.

“Nearly twenty years ago, the Aiel crossed the Spine of the World, the Dragonwall, the only time they have ever done so. They ravaged through Cairhien, destroyed every army sent against them, burned the city of

Cairhien itself, and fought all the way to Tar Valon. It was winter and snowing, but cold and heat mean little to the Aiel. The final battle, the last that counted, was fought outside the Shining Walls, in the shadow of Dragonmount. In three days and three nights of fighting, the Aiel were turned back. Or rather they turned back, for they had done what they came to do: kill King Laman of Cairhien, for his sin against the Tree. It is then that my story begins. And yours.

“I was one of the Accepted, then, soon to be raised to full sisterhood. That night another Accepted and I stood attendance on Tamra Ospanya, who was Amyrlin at the time. Her Keeper of the Chronicles, Gitara Moroso, was also there. But every other full sister in Tar Valon was out Healing as many wounded as she could find, even the Reds. It was dawn. The fire on the hearth could not keep the cold out. The snow had finally stopped, and in the Amyrlin’s chambers in the White Tower we could smell the smoke of outlying villages burned in the fighting.

“Gitara Sedai had the Foretelling sometimes. She was old, her hair as white as the snow outside, but when she had the Foretelling, it was strong. The morning light was starting to come strong through the windows as I handed her a cup of tea. The Amyrlin Seat asked me what news there was from the field of battle. Before I could answer, Gitara Sedai started up out of her chair, her arms and legs rigid, trembling, her face twisted in a strange grimace. She cried out, ‘He is born again! I feel him! The Dragon takes his first breath on the slope of Dragonmount. He is coming. He is coming! Light help us. Light help the world. He lies in the snow and cries like the thunder. He burns like the sun!’ And she fell forward into my arms, dead.

“Now, all Foretellings are true, but many hold their meanings close with cryptic or poetic language, and are properly understood only after they are fulfilled. Gitara Sedai’s Foretelling, though, was very clear, and agreed with one of the better-known passages of *The Karaethon Cycle*, the Prophecies of the Dragon. It says that the Dragon will be reborn an orphan on the slopes of Dragonmount, where he died during the Breaking of the World. So we knew: the Dragon was indeed reborn.

“The Amyrlin swore us to secrecy, me and the other Accepted, for she knew that some sisters, even many, would not see the Rebirth as it must be seen. She set us to searching. That battle orphaned many children. Too many. But we found a story, of one man who found an infant on the mountain. That was all. A man and an infant boy. So we searched on. For years we searched, finding other clues, poring over the Prophecies. ‘He will be of the ancient blood, and raised by the old blood.’ That was one; there were others. So we searched in places where the old blood, descended from the Age of Legends, remains strong. And in the Two Rivers, where the old blood of Manetheren seethes still like a river in flood, in Emond’s Field, I found three boys whose name-days were within weeks of the battle at Dragonmount. Matrim, Perrin, and you.

“Which of you might have been born on Dragonmount? I thought you the best candidate, since your mother was from outside the Two Rivers, and your father had spent many years away. But no one confirmed my suspicions until I spoke to the Wisdom yesterday.

“Your parents brought you with them when they came to settle in the Two Rivers. You were a newborn then, and they called you their son, and no one ever suspected otherwise. But Tam al’ Thor was the man, and you were the infant. He found you, and named you, and raised you as his own. But he did not father you, nor did your mother bear you.”

Rand remembered his blackout dream in Caemlyn. Him as a grey-eyed baby, crying in the snow. A dead woman holding him, killed in childbirth. Then another woman sitting down, rocking the baby in her arms. The Mother he remembered. Then Moiraine Sedai. *Mother was not my mother. I — I killed my mother.*

“I— ” he started. His mouth felt too dry to talk. He fought to get the words out. “I had a dream, or a vision. Me as a baby, in the cold, born to a woman not my mother. I mean, not Mother.”

Moiraine nodded. “The circumstances were right. You were born at the right time, and born outside the Two Rivers. But I could not be sure until I

saw you channel. Now, I have no doubt.

“Rand, you *are* the Dragon Reborn.”

Rand dropped his head into his hands. He was sobbing.

Peace and Safe Travels

The sun coming through the window in her chambers welcomed Egwene gently to the new day. She sat up in the bed, groggy and sleepy eyed. She wasn't sure of the time, and that made her smile. She couldn't remember the last morning she had woken up at her leisure.

She took her time getting dressed in clothes Lord Agelmar provided— a soft hemp chemise under a simple linen gown that fell to her ankles. A shawl of rabbit fur kept her warm. It was easily the smartest apparel she had ever worn. She had never even *seen* linen before. *The trollocs are broken, for true. This could be my **life** now. Aes Sedai, with *fine* gowns and cities and lords and the sun.* She felt light on her feet as she headed downstairs to find Moiraine. Then she remembered Rand.

Truth be told, she had been relieved when Moiraine had not let them see Rand the night before. The Aes Sedai said that he still needed rest, even if he had finally come to. Egwene was happy to give it to him. Their own uncomfortable history, what they'd been through on this journey and before, was enough to dampen her enthusiasm for talking to him, or even seeing him. But with the new knowledge that he could channel, that he had been touching the Dark One's foulness, she felt queasy just thinking about Rand. But the sun had fallen and risen again, and it was time for Rand to rejoin the group and ease back into the normal motion of the day. *What is normal now?* Egwene shrugged as she pushed her hair back over her ear and quickened her step.

She poked her head through a few doorways before she found the sitting room where the others had already gathered, all save Rand. Lord Agelmar

was there, too, and was speaking to Moiraine.

“... Sedai, I insist. At least as far as the river.”

“I tell you true, Lord Agelmar,” said Moiraine, “the threat has passed. Still, if it will ease your mind, I will gladly accept your men as far as the river. The important thing is not to go alone, but to go soon.”

“But why so soon, Moiraine Aes Sedai? If the threat has passed, you should stay a while and celebrate with us. You must!”

“My Lord, you honor me with your invitation, but truly we must be on our way. If the changing wind did not say so, the boy’s disappearance would. The latest battle is won, but the war goes on. It only grows deeper, and spring will not allay that. The enemy will not spend long licking its wounds, and we must make good use of the time so spent.”

“How could this boy”— Lord Agelmar paused as Egwene shuffled in, trying not to disrupt the conversation, then continued— “how could this boy be so important? If he is foolish enough to run off alone in the Borderlands, it will be a sad loss, but there is no sense risking Dai Shan’s life, or yours, or any of these other children. You should *all* be off to Tar Valon.”

Egwene looked at Nynaeve with a raised eyebrow and a worried mouth. Nynaeve just nodded and touched her ear. *Alright, I’ll listen. But if I don’t hear something like an explanation soon, I’m interrupting— lord or no.*

“My Lord, you must trust me on this, as you have trusted me before. The boy is important, as are these other children. Each has a part to play in the coming conflict with the enemy.”

“*Ta’veren*,” Loial said.

“The boy?” Lord Agelmar asked, looking dubious. “*Ta’veren*?”

“Yes,” Moiraine Sedai said, “as are these other two. And both of these girls are in line to be among the most powerful Aes Sedai in a thousand years.”

Egwene looked at Nynaeve and smiled. She could see on Nynaeve's face the fight between irritation at being called "girl," pride at Moiraine's appraisal of her talent, and shame at the nature of that talent. The others just gaped. *They didn't know about Nynaeve.* "We need these children, Lord Agelmar. I fear Tarmon Gai'don approaches."

"The Last Battle? Surely things are not so dire." He closed his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "What am I saying? Of course they are. The advancing Blight. The long winter. Coming to the brink of another Trolloc War." He met Moiraine's gaze with eyes of steel. "My men, as far as the river. What else can I do for you, Aes Sedai?"

"That is more than enough, my Lord. You do us great honor. I would like a moment alone with my companions, if it pleases you."

"Of course. I will await word of your plans."

As soon as he had left the room, Egwene's head whipped toward Moiraine. "What is going on here? Rand is missing? Why aren't we already looking for him?" She turned to Nynaeve and said in a hushed voice, "You could've woken me up, you know."

"Yes," Moiraine said, "Rand is missing. But so is his bay. I believe he left of his own free will, which is a small bit of good news. Had he been abducted, I would be much more concerned. Still, he has snuck off and is now on his own in a foreign land, and still recovering from the battle at the Waygate.

"I have a plan for what to do next, but it requires some explanation, including telling you all things you do not know about Rand al'Thor."

She's going to tell them. Egwene held her breath.

"You may have wondered," Moiraine started, looking at Mat, Perrin, and Loial, "why Rand was unconscious after the battle and you three were not, or at least were not for very long. The reason is plain, but it may shock you." She paused, letting everyone brace themselves for some horrible

revelation. Egwene shared a worried look with Nynaeve. *Whatever they're imagining, the truth is worse.* The pause lasted only half a breath, but it seemed forever to Egwene before Moiraine spoke again. "Rand's unconsciousness was a reaction to channeling *saidin*. Rand can touch the True Source and channel the One Power."

Egwene looked at the boys. Perrin's eyes were wide as he rubbed his forehead with two fingers. Mat's face didn't show much, but his hand crept slowly under his jacket. Perrin looked at her and she gave a short nod.

"Wait, you knew?" he said in a raised voice. "You knew and you ain't tell us?"

"We saw it during the battle," Nynaeve said, her voice tightly controlled. "We didn't know before then, and it didn't seem like our secret to share. He was out, anyway. He posed no danger in that state."

"Nynaeve and Egwene knew about the channeling," said Moiraine, "but there is more."

Egwene raised an eyebrow at this. Moiraine nodded to Lan standing in the far corner, and the warder brought a leather satchel to her. She reached in and took out the Eye of the World, only it was open— one half silver, one half gold.

"The Eye of the World is open. And as we have learned, the Dragon Reborn is destined to be the one who opens it. Rand opened it. He opened it and took what was stored inside of it— pure, untainted *saidin*. That is how we broke the trolloc army. It was Rand."

Egwene felt ill. *The Dragon Reborn? But he's just...Rand. Sweet boy from the Westwood.* She thought of how she had touched the Dragon Reborn, and how he had touched her, and shivered. She saw in the others' eyes the same shock and disquiet she felt in her own heart.

"That is not all the Eye held."

One by one she pulled three more items from the satchel. Each one she explained as she went, and each brought a bigger gasp than the one before. First, the very banner under which Lews Therin Kinslayer led the armies of Light against the Dark One. Then the impossible— the Horn of Valere. Mat and Perrin both touched it with reverence. Egwene could hardly stand to look at it. *The Horn. Does that mean we really are headed for the Last Battle?*

But the last item fascinated Egwene completely. Heartstone, but broken. *How did they make heartstone, those old Aes Sedai? Could I do it? And how did it break?* When Moiraine revealed that this was one of the seals of the Dark One's prison, broken, the entire room went as white as bleached cotton.

“The opening of the Eye, and the revelation of its contents— things those ancient Aes Sedai knew would be needed when the Dragon returned— can leave no doubt that Lews Therin is reborn.

*Like the unfettered dawn shall he blind us, and burn us,
yet shall the Dragon Reborn confront the Shadow at the Last
Battle,
and his blood shall give us the Light.*

“The Dragon is returned, and he has come for Tarmon Gai'don.”

“The Last Battle.” Loial's voice was soft, as if he were just whispering to himself.

“The Last Battle,” Moiraine said with a nod. “It draws nigh. I spoke true to Lord Agelmar. Each of you has a part to play, as do I. The Pattern has woven us together, and now it splits us apart again. I must go to Tar Valon, to report to the Amyrlin Seat about all we have seen, heard, and done. Egwene must come to begin her training, and Mat to be cured of the poison of the Shadar Logoth dagger. Lan must track Rand. His will be a long and difficult road, and he should not start down it alone.

“Loial, Perrin, Wisdom. You plot your own course now. I will offer counsel if you wish it, but I expect you each know where you are meant to be in this moment. These days, the Pattern is not shy about pushing us in the direction it wants.”

Was that it? Was the Pattern pushing her and Rand apart again? The feeling was akin to madness, how one moment she wanted to run from the boy and the next she wanted to lie with him. Right now she wanted to chase him, find him, make sure he was safe. Soon, she expected, she would want to disappear into the White Tower and never see him again. But however she felt about Rand, that was secondary. What hadn't wavered was her hunger for training in the One Power, her desire to become Aes Sedai. Moiraine was right. She had to go to Tar Valon.

Egwene looked over at Nynaeve. Would she come with Egwene and Moiraine and Mat? Or would she chase after her lost sheep— or lost shepherd, rather? Or would she go home to the Two Rivers, return to her position as Wisdom of Emond's Field? Whatever Nynaeve was thinking, it didn't show on her face.

“Gather your things quickly,” Moiraine said. “Time is short for all of us. I will see you all in the stables, and we may say our goodbyes to those who go in another direction. I will let Lord Agelmar know we are leaving, and extend our deepest gratitude for hosting us unannounced.

“May the Light shine upon us.”



Nynaeve followed Lan in the direction of the stables, though her own quarters were in the other direction. If someone noticed, so be it. She picked up her skirts and hurried to catch up to the warder, who kept a normal pace as he walked. She came around his left and cut him off. She looked him in the eye and took a couple of deep breaths.

“I might have known you’d be a king,” she said. She kept her eyes locked with his, but she heard a tremble in her voice.

“I am no king, Wisdom,” he said. His voice was gentler than she’d ever heard it. “I’m just a man. A man without so much as the meanest farmer’s croft to his name.”

“Why do your eyes catch mine so? Why do I hear softness in the sharp angles of your voice?” She paused and steadied her voice. “I’m going with Egwene, to Tar Valon. She’ll need me, I’ll wager. Someone to advise her besides Aes Sedai. Someone from home.” She paused. Everything she was saying was true, but was she not also curious herself about Tar Valon? *A filthy thought.* Still, knowing how to use the One Power would help her protect Egwene and the boys from Moiraine and her kind. *And Moiraine said we would be two of the strongest.* She blinked. None of this was the point. “She’ll need someone she can trust.”

“A sound plan,” he said. “This will be goodbye, then. I must find the sheepherder and make sure he doesn’t cut his own head off by accident before Tarmon Gai’don.”

Nynaeve took a breath, knowing she was straining the bounds of propriety. “Will I see you again?”

“The Wheel weaves as the—”

“Don’t say it. Don’t say that.”

“It is true, Nynaeve. I cannot say where or when I’ll die, or where I’ll be when summer comes. I can no more make a promise than I can make the rain come and the trees grow.”

“Well, *I* can. I *will* see you again, Lan Mandragoran.”

“I... I would like that, Wisdom.”

She put a hand on his chest and let it rest for a moment, then hurried back toward her room without another word. She still needed to make ready to leave. To leave for Tar Valon.

Mat lashed his blanketroll to his pack and slung it over his shoulder. Then he grabbed his quarterstaff, patted the dagger beneath his coat, and walked over to Perrin, who was already standing in the doorway. They started down the hall, toward the stables.

“So what do you reckon you’ll do?” Mat asked.

“Well, you’re gonna have Egwene to keep you company, and maybe Nynaeve besides— though I ain’t sure as she counts for company. Regardless, Rand ain’t got no one, and even if Lan finds him, Lan ain’t much better than Nynaeve, company-wise. So I figure I’ll go with Lan, find Rand, make sure he ain’t alone. Make sure he’s ok.”

Mat looked at his friend. “What do you make of all that stuff Moiraine said. About the, you know...”

Perrin shook his head. “I mean, she can’t lie, right? And I ain’t sure how she could twist those words to mean aught but what they sounded like. So... I don’t know. I guess...”

“If it were to be anybody from the Two Rivers, it would have to be him, right?” Perrin started to open his mouth but Mat cut him off. “That ain’t what I mean. It was just me and Rand after Shadar Logoth. He took care of me and I ain’t ever gonna forget it. He’s my brother and I’d walk through fire for him. But— I mean, he has outlander blood in him, and he was always a mite off, wasn’t he? I don’t like him any less for it, but I’m saying — it would have to be him.”

“I can’t even think on what he’s feeling. I mean, if I found that out about myself, I’d go mad, for true. So yeah, I figure he could stand a friendly face. Besides, I know I could use a break from Aes Sedai, not a city full of them.”

Mat shuddered. “Don’t say that. It puts a bug in my collar.”

“What are you gonna do there? I mean after they—”

“Don’t right know. Don’t right know.” Mat turned and grinned at Perrin.

“But Tar Valon is one of the great cities. I expect it must have some type of trouble to get into.”



“I have always wanted to see Tar Valon,” Loial said. “I meant to go there after Caemlyn, originally. But my adventure was... interrupted. By another, grander adventure.”

“You would be welcome, of course,” Moiraine said. “Even the White Tower sees far too little of the ogier.”

“Yes, I begin to think my time Outside is less about what I might discover and more about letting humans rediscover me and the rest of the ogier.”

“It is a noble undertaking, Builder,” she said.

“Yes, but an undertaking I fear I must set aside for a bit,” Loial said with a sigh. “Rand al’Thor’s *ta’veren* pull is strong.”

“Stronger even than that of the *stedding*? There is no telling how long this next leg of the journey will be, or where it will end up.”

Loial’s ears lifted a little. “There was no telling when we all met in Caemlyn, either. But the Pattern pushed me then, and I believe the Pattern

pushes me now. What you said, about Rand being the return of Lews Therin... Well, you see, I have begun making notes, and I was thinking I might write a book about all of this. About my time Outside. But now I think it will be about him—the Dragon Reborn. Or perhaps the Last Battle. Either way, I believe my pen wants to follow Rand.”

“Very well, Loial, son of Arent, son of Halan. Follow the boy. Try to keep him safe, and to help him learn what he must know. I expect we will meet again.”

“Yes, Aes Sedai. I hope so.”

They didn’t say anything for a while, but they remained side by side, as their chambers were in the same hall. When they reached Loial’s room, he stopped and bowed to Moiraine, who nodded slightly in answer. Then he went in his room to gather his things.

Then he would be off to chase the Dragon Reborn.



Egwene stood scratching Bela’s neck the way she liked. She had become close to the mare, but this morning she seemed very much Rand’s horse. Perhaps that was to be expected, what with him disappearing, and her not knowing if she’d ever see him again. *How quickly will he go mad? How quickly will it kill him? Will he hurt anyone before he dies?* Her throat closed up and she used her sleeve to wipe her eyes. As the fabric touched her face she realized she already missed the fine attire Lord Agelmar had given to them. She was back in her traveling clothes, now.

Egwene was the first to reach the stables, but the others followed in short order. They readied their horses in silence until everyone was set to leave. Lan and Moiraine stepped aside for a hushed, private conversation, and

everyone else said their goodbyes rather sheepishly. Egwene gave Perrin a long, close hug.

“I’ll miss you, you big ox,” she said. She brushed more tears away on his shoulder.

“And I you. Stay out of trouble, alright? Don’t let them Aes Sedai change who you are.”

“And you don’t let *anyone* change who you are. There’s not a thing wrong with you. And I think your eyes are beautiful.”

He squeezed and sniffed, then let her go.

She said goodbye to Loial, then looked at the two of them together. “I’ll see you again,” she said. “Both of you. Believe that.”

Perrin gave her a weary smile, then looked past her at Moiraine and Lan as they approached.

“Is all ready?” the Aes Sedai asked.

Lan said his goodbyes quickly, bowing with a stiff formality and saying very little.

“You take care of him, Lan,” she said when he came to her. “Keep him safe.”

“I will do my best.”

Moiraine gave Loial and Perrin some parting words, then everyone mounted up. Before they could go their separate ways, Lord Agelmar came to bid them goodbye.

“The Builders return, Manetheren rides again, and Dai Shan parts ways with Moiraine Sedai. Surely these are dangerous and important times. So much history is grim; I hope you have come to write it gay. Farewell and safe travels, my friends. Peace favor you, and return you here unharmed.”

“Peace, Lord Agelmar,” Moiraine said. “Thank you for your generous hospitality and your wise counsel. You are, as ever, a true friend.”

They bowed their heads one last time, and the two parties went their separate ways— Lan’s group heading east and Moiraine’s southwest.

“What a strange thing to say,” Egwene said. “‘Peace favor you.’ Why do they use ‘peace’ like that?”

“When you have never known a thing except as a dream,” Moiraine said, “it becomes more powerful than a word or an idea, more real than a wish or an aspiration. Peace in the Borderlands— it is something sublime and eternal.”

“Peace,” Egwene said, turning the word over in her mouth as if it were just newly learned. *Will we ever know peace again? Tarmon Gai’don. Does the Last Battle promise peace afterward, or death? Or are they the same?*

She looked back, but Perrin and the others were already out of view.

Epilogue

The man looked up at the sky, squinting in the hard light of the sun. He knelt down and touched the soil, picking some up and letting it fall through his fingers. He stood and brushed his hands together until they were clean of any dirt, then straightened his white coat carefully. He loosened his plum scarf and took a deep breath.

“I am returned,” he said with a grin. “This should be fun.”

Glossary

A note on dates in this glossary

The Toman calendar era (devised by Toma dur Ahmid) began with the death of the last male Aes Sedai, and is noted with the designation AB (for After the Breaking). So many records were destroyed in the Trolloc Wars that when the Wars ended, widespread disagreement about the exact year under the Toman system led to the adoption of the Gazaran calendar era. Proposed by Tiam of Gazar, the new system reckoned the years from the end of the Trolloc Wars and humanity's supposed freedom from the trolloc threat. The Gazaran designation is FY, for "Free Years," and scholars today agree that FY 1 was approximately 1,350 years after the Breaking. Artur Hawkwing attempted to establish a new calendar era beginning with the founding of his empire (FF, From the Founding), but only historians still know and referred to the FF era. After the widespread destruction, death, and disruption of the War of the Hundred Years, Uren din Jubai Soaring Gull, a scholar of the Sea Folk, devised yet another calendar system. The Farede calendar (named for the Panarch Farede of Tarabon who adopted and promulgated it) used a new system of thirteen 28-day months, and counted the years from the end of the War of the Hundred Years, or FY 1135. The Farede calendar, which uses the designation NE (for New Era), remains current today.

Adan, Heran (*Ā-dən, HAIR-ən*): Governor of Baerlon.

Aes Sedai (*Ī-yes sə-DĪ*): Literally, “servants of all” in the Old Tongue, “Aes Sedai” refers both to people who can wield the One Power and to the society of such people, based in Tar Valon. Since the Time of Madness, all Aes Sedai have been women. Aes Sedai have a monopoly on the One Power, searching in all nations and places for girls with the ability or potential to channel and bringing them back to the White Tower to be trained as Aes Sedai. Attitudes toward Aes Sedai range from near worship to deep distrust and hatred, though negative opinions are the more common. Widely distrusted and feared, many blame them for the Breaking of the World, and they are generally thought to meddle in the affairs of nations. Even still, few rulers go without an Aes Sedai advisor, even in lands where the existence of such a connection must be kept secret. Used as an honorific (e.g., Sheriam Sedai) and as a high honorific (e.g. Sheriam Aes Sedai). *See also* Ajah; Amyrlin Seat.

Pronunciation: Syllables are separated by hyphens. Stressed syllables are given in CAPITALS.

VOWELS: a: cat // ā: hate // aa: calm // air: hair // ar: bar // aw: paw // e: bed // ē: meet // ə: along (schwa) // eer: near // i: pin // ī: kite // o: top // ō: coat // oo: soon // oor: tour // or: torn // ow: cow // oy: boy // u: cup // ur: her // uu: book

CONSONANTS: b: bat // ch or tch: chin // d: day // f: fat // g: get // h: hat // j: jam // k: king // l: leg // m: man // n: not // ng: sing // ng-g: finger // nk: thank // p: pen // r: red // s: sit // sh: shop // t: top // th: thin // dh: this // v: van // w: will // y: yes // z: zebra // zh: vision

Age Lace: *See* Pattern of an Age.

Age of Legends: The Age ended by the War of the Shadow and the Breaking of the World. A time when Aes Sedai performed wonders now only dreamt of. Also called the Second Age. *See also* Wheel of Time.

Agelmar; Lord Agelmar of House of Jagad (*AG-əl-mar; jə-GAAD*): Lord of Fal Dara. His sign is three running red foxes.

Aiel (*ī-YĒL*): (Literally, “dedicated” in the Old Tongue.) The people of the Aiel Waste. Fierce and hardy. Also called Aielmen. They veil their faces before they kill, giving rise to the saying “acting like a black-veiled Aiel” to describe someone who is being violent or antagonistic. Aiel warriors are

deadly with or without weapons. Their pipers play them into battle with the music of dances, and Aielmen call battle “the Dance.”

Aiel Waste: The harsh, rugged, and all-but-waterless land east of the Spine of the World. Few outsiders venture there, not only because water is almost impossible to find for one not born there, but because the Aiel consider themselves at war with all other peoples and do not welcome strangers.

Ajah (AA-*zhaa*): One of the seven societies among the Aes Sedai, designated by colors: Blue Ajah, Red Ajah, White Ajah, Green Ajah, Brown Ajah, Yellow Ajah, and Gray Ajah. Every Aes Sedai belongs to one (and only one) of these societies. Each Ajah follows a specific philosophy of the use of the One Power and purposes of the Aes Sedai. For example, the Red Ajah bends all its energies to finding and gentling men who are attempting to wield the Power. The Brown Ajah, on the other hand, forsakes involvement with the world and dedicates itself to seeking knowledge. There are rumors (hotly denied, and never safely mentioned in front of any Aes Sedai) of a Black Ajah, dedicated to serving the Dark One.

Al Ellisande! (al *ə*l-li-SAAN-de): (Literally, “the rose of the sun” in the Old Tongue.) The popular nickname for Eldrene ay Ellan ay Carlan, the last queen of Manetheren.

Aldieb (aal-*DĒB*): (Literally, “west wind” in the Old Tongue. The west wind was known as the wind that brings the spring rains.) Moiraine Sedai’s horse, a white mare.

al’Meara, Nynaeve (al-MĒR-aa, NĪ-nāv): The Wisdom of Emond’s Field.

al’Thor, Rand (al-THOR, RAND): A young farmer and shepherd from the Two Rivers.

al’Vere, Egwene (al-VAIR, eh-GWĀN): The youngest daughter of the mayor of Emond’s Field in the Two Rivers.

Amyrlin Seat (AM-ur-lin): (1 .) The title of the leader of the Aes Sedai. Elected for life by the Hall of the Tower, the highest council of the Aes

Sedai, which consists of three representatives from each of the seven Ajahs. The Amyrlin Seat has, theoretically at least, almost supreme authority among the Aes Sedai. She ranks as the equal of a king or queen. (2.) The throne upon which the leader of the Aes Sedai sits.

Andor (*AN-dor*): One of the current kingdoms of Asur. Andor includes the Two Rivers, though that remote district has, at best, tenuous ties to the capital of Caemlyn. The sign of Andor is a rampant white lion on a field of red.

angreal (*AAN-grā-aal*): An object that allows a channeler to handle a greater amount of the One Power than would be safely possible unaided. Remnants of the Age of Legends, *angreal* are very rare, and the means of their making is no longer known. *See also* channel; One Power; *sa'angreal*.

Arafel (*AIR-rə-fel*): One of the Borderlands. The sign of Arafel is three white roses on a field of red, quartered with three red roses on a field of white.

Aram (*ə-RAAM*): A young man of the Tuatha'an.

Asur (*aa-SOOR*): The continent bounded by the Aryth Ocean on the west, the Aiel Waste to the east, the Sea of Storms to the south, and the Great Blight to the north.

Avendesora (*aa-VEN-də-SOR-aa*): (Literally, “the tree of life” in the Old Tongue.) A tree mentioned in many stories and legends.

Aybara, Perrin (*ī-BAR-ə, PAIR-ən*): A young blacksmith's apprentice from Emond's Field.

Baerlon (*BĀ-er-lon*): A city in Andor on the road from Caemlyn to the mines in the Caladaice Mountains.

Barron, Doral (*BAIR-rən, DOR-əl*): The Wisdom in Emond's Field prior to Nynaeve al'Meara.

Bel Tine (*BEL TĪN*): Spring festival in the Two Rivers.

Black Ajah: See Ajah.

Blasted Lands: Desolated lands surrounding Shayol Ghul, beyond the Great Blight.

Blight: See Great Blight.

Blue Ajah: See Ajah.

Borderlands: The nations bordering the Great Blight: Saldaea, Arafel, Kandor, and Shienar.

Bornhald, Dain (*BORN-haald, DĀN*): An officer of the Children of the Light, son of Lord Captain Geofram Bornhald.

Bornhald, Geofram (*BORN-haald, JEF-rəm*): A Lord Captain of the Children of the Light.

Breaking of the World: The radical and violent transformation of the world by the last male Aes Sedai. When Lews Therin Telamon and the Hundred Companions resealed its prison, the Dark One's counterstroke left a taint on *saidin*. Eventually it drove every male Aes Sedai to madness. These men, who could wield the One Power to a degree now unknown, caused great earthquakes and floods, froze and burned the land and air, leveled mountain ranges and created new ones, lifted dry land where seas had been and covered dry lands in ocean. Many parts of the world were completely depopulated, and the survivors were scattered like dust on the wind. This destruction is remembered in stories, legends, and history as the Breaking of the World. *See also* Hundred Companions.

Bryne, Gareth (*BRIN, GAIR-eth*): Captain-General of the Queen's Guard in Andor. Also serves as Morgase's First Prince of the Sword. His sign is three golden stars, each of five rays.

Byar, Jaret (*BĪ-ur, JAIR-ət*): An officer of the Children of the Light.

Caemlyn (*KĀM-lin*): The capital city of Andor.

Cairhien (*KAIR-hīn*): (1.) A nation along the Spine of the World. (2.) The capital city of that nation. The city was burned and looted during the Aiel War (976–978 NE). The sign of Cairhien is a many-rayed golden sun rising from the bottom of a field of sky blue.

Carai an Caldazar! (*car-Ī aan CAL-də-zar*): (Literally, “For the honor of the Red Eagle!” in the Old Tongue.) The ancient battle cry of Manetheren.

Carai an Ellisande!: (Literally, “For the honor of the Rose of the Sun!” in the Old Tongue.) The battle cry of Aemon al Caar al Thorin, the last king of Manetheren.

Cauthon, Matrim (Mat) (*CAW-thən, MA-trim*): A young farmer from the Two Rivers.

channel: To control the flow of the One Power.

Children of the Light: A society holding strict ascetic beliefs, dedicated to the defeat of the Dark One and the destruction of all darkfriends. Founded during the War of the Hundred Years by Lothair Mantelar (*LŌ-thair MAN-tə-LAR*) to proselytize against a perceived growth in the number of darkfriends, they evolved during the war into a completely military organization. Mantelar’s book *The Way of the Light* became the basis of their ideology, which values a simple, humble life free of the temptation to touch the True Source, an act reserved for the Creator alone. They try to use their military strength and the widespread fear of being named a darkfriend to enforce their code of morality on Asur. Dogmatic to the extreme, they denounce as darkfriends any who challenge their authority or suggest that there are legitimate ways of life outside of the Way of the Light. They hate Aes Sedai, considering them, and any who support or befriend them, darkfriends. The Children of the Light typically refer to themselves as ‘the Children,’ though most people call them Whitecloaks because of the snowy white cloaks they wear over their armor. The Children are headquartered in the Fortress of the Light in the Amadician city of Amador. Although Amadicia has a king, the Children are the nation’s de facto political rulers.

Covenant of the Ten Nations: A union of nations formed in the centuries after the Breaking of the World (circa 200 AB). Dedicated to the defeat of the Dark One, the Covenant fell apart during the Trolloc Wars.

cuendillar (*KWEN-də-lar*): See heartstone.

Dai Shan (*DĪ SHAAN*): (Literally, “battle lord” in the Old Tongue.) An ancient title of nobility in the Borderlands.

Damodred, Lord Galadreid (*DAAM-ō-dred, gə-LAD-drē-ed*): The only son of Taringail Damodred and Tigraine; half-brother to Elayne and Gawyn. His sign is a winged silver sword, point-down.

Damodred, Prince Taringail (*DAAM-ō-dred, TAR-in-gāl*): A Royal Prince of Cairhien, he married Tigraine and fathered Galadreid. When Tigraine disappeared and was declared dead, he married Morgase and fathered Elayne and Gawyn. He died in a hunting accident. His sign was a golden, double-bitted battle axe.

Dark One: According to legend, the source of all evil and the antithesis (and adversary) of the Creator. At the very moment of Creation, the Creator confined the Dark One in a prison at Shayol Ghul. An attempt to free it from that prison brought about the War of the Shadow, the tainting of *saidin*, the Breaking of the World, and the end of the Age of Legends.

Dark One, naming the: Saying the true name of the Dark One (Na’aimour), popularly believed to inevitably bring ill fortune at best, disaster at worst. For that reason, people use many euphemisms in place of Na’aimour, including the Dark One, Father of Lies, Sightblinder, Lord of the Grave, Shepherd of the Night, Heartsbane, Heartfang, Grassburner, and Leafblighter. Someone who seems to be inviting ill fortune is often said to be “naming the Dark One.”

Darkfriends: Those who follow the Dark One. Most believe that darkfriends are motivated by promises of great power and rewards, though some insist they follow the Dark One out of belief in its vision for the world.

Daughter-heir: Title of the heir to the throne of Andor, typically the eldest daughter of the Queen. Without a surviving daughter, the throne goes to the nearest female blood-relation of the Queen.

Djevik K'Shar (DZHE-vik kə-SHAR): In the trolloc tongue, “The Dying Ground.” The trolloc name for the Aiel Waste.

Domon, Bayle (DŌ-mon, BĀL): The captain of the Spray.

Draghkar (DRAG-KAR): A flying creature of the Dark One.

Dragon: The name by which Lews Therin Telamon was known during the War of the Shadow. In the madness which overtook all male Aes Sedai, Lews Therin killed every living person who carried any of his blood, as well as everyone he loved, thus earning the name Kinslayer. *See also* Dragon Reborn; False Dragon; Kinslayer.

Dragon Reborn: According to prophecy and legend, Lews Therin Telamon — the Dragon— will be born again at mankind’s greatest hour of need to save the world. Most people dread the idea of the Dragon being reborn, both because they fear and hate the memory of the man named Kinslayer, and because the prophecies say the Dragon Reborn will bring a new Breaking to the world. *See also* Dragon; False Dragon.

Dragon’s Fang: A stylized mark, usually black, in the shape of upside-down teardrop, but curved like a crescent moon, so the point of it looks like a claw or a fang. Scrawled on a door or a house, it is an accusation of evil against the people inside.

dreadlords: Men and women able to channel the One Power that went to the Shadow during the Trolloc Wars. They acted as battle commanders, above the myrddraal in chain of command. Known among the Shadow’s forces as the Valdar Mael (literally “the Hope Guard” in the Old Tongue).

Easar; King Easar of House Togita (Ā-əs-ar; tō-GĒ-tə): King of Shienar. His sign is a white hart, which according to Shienaran custom is held also to be a sign of Shienar along with the Black Hawk.

Elaida (*e-LĪ-də*): An Aes Sedai who advises Queen Morgase of Andor.

Elayne (*e-LĀN*): Queen Morgase's daughter, the Daughter-heir to the Throne of Andor. Her sign is a golden lily.

Elsa Grinwell (*EL-sə GRIN-wel*): A farmer's daughter met on the Caemlyn Road.

eyeless: See myrddraal.

fade: See myrddraal.

Fain, Padan (*FĀN, PAD-ən*): A peddler who arrives in Emond's Field just before Winternight.

False Dragon: Any of the men who have falsely claimed to be the Dragon Reborn and attracted a sizable following based on that claim. Some false Dragons have had followings large enough that they required armies to put them down. The resulting wars have sometimes pulled several nations in at once. In the end, though, all have either disappeared, been captured, or been killed, never having fulfilled any of the Prophecies concerning the Rebirth of the Dragon. Indeed, most of these men could not channel the One Power, though a few could. *See also* Dragon Reborn.

Far Dareis Mai (*FAR DARəz MĪ*): Literally, "Maidens of the Spear." One of a number of warrior societies of the Aiel; unlike any of the others, it admits women and only women. A Maiden may not marry and remain in the society, nor may she fight while carrying a child. Any child born to a Maiden is given to another woman to raise, in such a way that no one knows who the child's mother was. ("You may belong to no man, nor may any man belong to you, nor any child. The spear is your lover, your child, and your life.") These children are treasured, for it is prophesied that a child born of a Maiden will unite the clans and return to the Aiel to the greatness they knew during the Age of Legends.

Farstrider, Jain (*JĀN*): A hero of the north who journeyed to many lands and had many adventures; the author of several books, as well as being the

subject of books and stories. He vanished in 981 NE.

Father of Lies: See Dark One.

First Prince of the Sword: Title of the commander of Andor's military. Normally, the eldest brother of the Queen has been trained since childhood to command the Queen's armies in wartime and advise the Queen in peacetime. If the Queen has no surviving brother, she appoints someone to that title.

fist: The basic military unit of the trollocs, their size ranging from 100 to 200 trollocs. A fist is usually, but not always, commanded by a myrddraal.

Five Powers: There are threads to the One Power, and each person who can channel the One Power can usually grasp some threads better than others. These threads are named according to the sorts of things that can be done under them— Earth, Air, Fire, Water, and Spirit— and are called the Five Powers. Any wielder of the One Power will have a greater degree of strength with one, or possibly two, of these, and lesser strength in the others. Some few may have great strength with three, but since the Age of Legends no one has had great strength with all five. Even then this was extremely rare. The degree of strength can vary greatly between individuals, so that some who can channel are much stronger than others. Performing certain acts with the One Power requires ability in one or more of the Five Powers. For example, starting or controlling a fire requires Fire, and affecting the weather requires Air and Water, while Healing requires Water and Spirit. While Spirit was found equally in men and in women, great ability with Earth and/or Fire was found much more often among men, with Water and/or Air among women. None of the Powers is stronger than the others, and which powers a channeler is adept with is not a factor in assessing her overall strength with the One Power.

Flame of Tar Valon: The symbol of Tar Valon and the Aes Sedai. A stylized, sinuous representation of a flame, fat and round on the bottom, sharpening to a point at the top.

Forsaken: Name given to thirteen of the most powerful Aes Sedai ever known, who went over to the Dark One during the War of the Shadow. According to both legend and fragmentary records, they were trapped along with the Dark One when its prison was resealed. Their names are still used to frighten children.

Galad (*gə-LAD*): See Damodred, Lord Galadreid.

Gawyn (*GA-win*): Queen Morgase's son, Elayne's brother, who will be First Prince of the Sword when Elayne ascends the throne. His sign is a white boar.

gentling: The act, performed by Aes Sedai, of permanently cutting off a male channeler from the One Power. This is necessary because any man who channels will go insane from the taint on *saidin* and will almost certainly do horrible things with the Power in his madness. A man who has been gentled can still sense the True Source, but he cannot touch it. Whatever madness has come before gentling is arrested by the act of gentling, but not cured by it, and if it is done soon enough death can be averted. However, gentling often ends in death, as men who can no longer feel the ecstasy of the One Power within them usually lose the will to live, and will often die of various direct causes connected to this. Common causes of post-gentling death include suicide, refusing to eat or drink, or simply becoming too weak to continue living.

gleeman: A traveling storyteller, musician, juggler, tumbler, and multi-talented entertainer. Known by their trademark cloaks of many-colored patches, they perform mainly in the villages and smaller towns, since larger towns and cities have other forms of entertainment available.

Great Blight: A region in the far north, entirely corrupted by the Dark One. A haunt of trollocs, myrddraal, and other creatures of the Dark One.

Great Hunt of the Horn: A epic cycle of stories concerning the legendary search for the Horn of Valere in the years between the end of the Trolloc Wars and the beginning of the War of the Hundred Years.

Great Lord of the Dark: Darkfriends' name for the Dark One. Darkfriends say that to use its true name would be blasphemous.

Great Pattern: The Wheel of Time weaves the Patterns of the Ages into the Great Pattern, which is the whole of existence and reality, past, present and future. Also known as the Lace of Ages. *See also* Pattern of an Age; Wheel of Time.

Great Serpent: A symbol for time and eternity, ancient before the Age of Legends began, consisting of a serpent eating its own tail.

halfman: *See* myrddraal.

Hawkwing, Artur: A legendary king who united all the lands west of the Spine of the World, as well as some lands beyond the Aiel Waste. He even sent armies across the Aryth Ocean, but all contact with these was lost at his death, which set off the War of the Hundred Years. His sign was a golden hawk in flight. *See also* War of the Hundred Years.

Heartfang; Heartsbane: *See* Dark One.

heartstone: An indestructible substance created during the Age of Legends. Any known force used in an attempt to break it is absorbed, making heartstone stronger.

Horn of Valere (və-LĒR): The legendary object of the Great Hunt of the Horn. The Horn supposedly can call back dead heroes from the grave to fight against the Shadow.

Hundred Companions: One hundred male Aes Sedai, among the most powerful of the Age of Legends, who, led by Lews Therin Telamon, launched the final stroke that ended the War of the Shadow by sealing the Dark One back into his prison. The Dark One's counterstroke during that battle tainted *saidin*; the Hundred Companions went mad and began the Breaking of the World.

Illian (*IL-lē-ən*): A great port on the Sea of Storms, capital city of the nation of the same name. The sign of Illian is nine golden bees on a field of dark green.

Ingтар; Lord Ingтар of House Shinowa (*ING-tar; shi-NŌ-wə*): A Shienaran warrior met at Fal Dara.

Kandor (*KAN-dor*): One of the Borderlands. The sign of Kandor is a rearing red horse on a field of pale green.

Kinch, Hyam (*KINCH, HĪ-əm*): A farmer met on the Caemlyn Road.

Kinslayer: A name for Lews Therin Telamon, who went mad after the Dark One tainted *saidin* and killed every living person who carried any of his blood, as well as everyone he loved. *See also* Dragon; Dragon Reborn.

Lace of Ages: *See* Great Pattern.

Lan; al'Lan Mandragoran (*al-LAN man-DRAG-or-ən*): A warrior from the north; Moiraine's companion.

Leafblighter: *See* Dark One.

league: A measure of distance equal to four miles. *See also* mile.

Loial (*loy-AL*): Another traveler met in Caemlyn.

lurk: *See* myrddraal.

Machera, Elyas (*mə-CHAIR-ə, ē-LĪ-əs*): A man Perrin and Egwene encounter in the forest.

Mahdi (*MAA-dē*): (Literally, “seeker” in the Old Tongue.) Title of the leader of a Tuatha'an caravan.

Malkier (*mal-KĒR*): A nation, once one of the Borderlands, now consumed by the Blight. The sign of Malkier was a golden crane in flight.

Mandarb (*MAN-darb*): (Literally, “blade” in the Old Tongue.) Lan’s horse, a black stallion.

Manetheren (*MAN-əth-AIR-ən*): One of the Ten Nations that made the Second Covenant, and also the capital city of that nation. Both city and nation were completely destroyed in the Trolloc Wars.

Maradon (*MAIR-ə-don*): The capital city of Saldaea.

Merrilin, Thom (*MAIR-rə-lin, TOM*): A gleeman who comes to Emond’s Field to perform at Bel Tine.

mile: A measure of distance equal to one thousand spans. Four miles make one league. *See also* span.

Min (*MIN*): A young woman encountered at the Stag and Lion in Baerlon.

Moiraine (*mwaa-RĀN-ə*): A visitor to Emond’s Field who arrives just before Winternight.

Morgase (*mor-GĀS*): Queen of Andor, High Seat of House Trakand (*traa-KAAND*). Her sign is three golden keys. The sign of House Trakand is a silver keystone.

myrddraal (*MURD-drəl*): Creatures of the Dark One, commanders of the trollocs. The exact nature and origin of myrddraal remains a mystery, though they almost certainly date from the War of Power. Physically they are like humans except that they have no eyes, but can see like eagles in light or dark. Their skin is extremely pale, almost a pure white. They have certain powers stemming from the Dark One, including the ability to cause paralyzing fear with a look and the ability to vanish wherever there are shadows. One of their few known weaknesses is a reluctance to cross running water. In different lands they are known by many names, among them halfmen, the Eyeless, shadowmen, lurks, and fades.

Na’aimour (*na-Ī-mour*): *See* Dark One.

ogier (*Ō-gē-ər*): A non-human race common to stories and legends about the Age of Legends and the time just after the Breaking of the World.

One Power: The power flowing from the True Source, turning the Wheel of Time. A very small minority of people are able to touch the True Source and draw the One Power, using it to perform feats far beyond the capabilities of a normal human. Some of these people must be taught how to touch the True Source, but some have the ability inborn. These few will touch the True Source and channel the Power whether they want to or not, whether they are taught to or not, whether they realize they are doing it or not. Channeling is different for men and women. The One Power is divided into a male half (*saidin*) and a female half (*saidar*), which work at the same time with and against each other. Only a man can draw on *saidin*, only a woman on *saidar*. Since the beginning of the Time of Madness, *saidin* has been tainted by the Dark One's touch. Men who channel *saidin* inevitably go mad and then die. But even before the Dark One fouled *saidin*, those with an inborn ability to touch the True Source, whether men or women, faced a very real danger of death. Once the ability manifests— usually in late adolescence or early adulthood— the channeler must learn control or the Power will kill them. Without training, only one in four can learn this control on their own. *See also* channel; Time of Madness; True Source.

pace: A measure of distance equal to three feet. Two paces make a span.

Pattern of an Age: The Wheel of Time weaves the threads of human lives into the Pattern of an Age, which forms the substance of reality for that Age; also known as Age Lace. *See also* *ta'veren*.

Questioners: A colloquial name for the Hand of the Light, an order within the Children of the Light. Their avowed purposes are discovering the truth in disputations and uncovering Darkfriends. Their particular focus has led to even more rabid zealousness than that which characterizes the Children of the Light as a whole. Torture is their standard method of inquiry, and their usual attitude toward inquiries is that they are only to confirm the truth that the Questioners already know. The Questioners sometimes act as if they were entirely separate from the Children and the Council of the

Anointed, which commands the Children. The High inquisitor (the head of the Questioners) also sits on the Council of the Anointed.

Red Ajah: *See* Ajah.

sa'angreal (*saa-AAN-grā-aal*): An object that allows a channeler to handle a far greater amount of the One Power than would be safely possible unaided. A *sa'angreal* is like unto, but much, much more powerful than, an *angreal*. Remnants of the Age of Legends, *sa'angreal* are even rarer than *angreal*, and the means of their making is likewise no longer known. *See also* channel; One Power; *angreal*.

saidar; saidin (*sī-DAR; sī-DIN*): *See* One Power.

Saldaea (*saal-DĀ-ə*): One of the Borderlands. The sign of Saldaea is three silver fish on a field of dark blue.

Sea Folk: Inhabitants of islands in the Aryth (*AIR-ith*) Ocean and the Sea of Storms. The Sea Folk spend little time on those islands, living most of their lives on their ships. Most seaborne trade is carried by Sea Folk ships.

Second Covenant: Another name for the Covenant of the Ten Nations.

Shadar Logoth (*SHA-dər lə-GŌTH*): (Literally, “the place where the shadow waits” in the Old Tongue.) A city abandoned and shunned since the Trolloc Wars. Also called “Shadow’s Waiting.”

shadowman: *See* myrddraal.

shadowspawn: A generic term for creatures of the Dark One, including trollocs, myrddraal, and draghkar.

Shayol Ghul (*SHĀ-əl GOOL*): A deep canyon in the Blasted Lands, the site of the Dark One’s prison.

Shepherd of the Night: *See* Dark One.

Sheriam (*SHĒR-ē-əm*): An Aes Sedai of the Blue Ajah.

Shienar (*SHĪ-ə-nar*): One of the Borderlands. The sign of Shienar is a stooping black hawk.

shoufa (*SHOO-fə*): An Aiel garment, usually the color of sand or rock, that wraps around the head and neck, leaving only the face bare.

Sightburner: *See* Dark One.

span: A measure of distance equal to two paces. A thousand spans make a mile.

Spine of the World: A towering mountain range, with only a few passes, separating the Aiel Waste from the lands to the west.

stedding (*STED-ing*): An ogier homeland, portrayed in story and legend as havens.

Stone of Tear: The fortress guarding the city of Tear. Said to be the earliest fortress built after the Time of Madness, and said by some to have been built *during* the Time of Madness. *See also* Tear.

Sunday: A feastday and festival in midsummer, widely celebrated.

tabac (*tə-BAAK*): A weed, widely cultivated. The leaves of it, when dried and cured, are burned in pipes, the fumes being inhaled.

Tallanvor, Martyn (*TAL-en-vōr, maar-TĒN*): Guardsman-Lieutenant of the Queen's Guard in Caemlyn.

ta'maral'ailen (*TAA-mar-əl-Ī-lən*): (Literally, "web of destiny" in the Old Tongue.) The major variations in the Pattern of an Age that occur when the life-thread of a *ta'veren* swirls all the threads around it, and those force other threads, and those still others, and so on. *See also* *ta'veren*.

Tanreall, Artur Paendrag (*taan-RĀ-əl, ar-TOOR PĀ-ən-DRAG*): *See* Hawkwing, Artur.

Tar Valon (*TAR və-LON*): A city on an island in the River Erinin. The center of Aes Sedai power, and location of the Amyrlin Seat.

ta'veren (*taa-VĀR-ən*): A person around whom the Wheel of Time weaves all surrounding life-threads to form a Web of Destiny. Sometimes the Pattern is forced to bend to *ta'veren*, and sometimes the Wheel forces *ta'veren* to the needed path. *See also* Pattern of an Age.

Tear (*TĒR*): (1 .) A nation on the Sea of Storms, at the western foot of the Spine of the World. (2.) The capital city of that nation, and the greatest seaport on the Sea of Storms. The sign of Tear is three white crescents on a field of red and gold.

Telamon, Lews Therin (*TEL-ə-mon, LOOZ THAIR-in*): *See* Dragon.

ter'angreal (*tər-AAN-grā-aal*): An object of the One Power that performs a specific function. Some *ter'angreal* must be activated and energized with the One Power and can be used only by Aes Sedai. Others, anyone can use. The original purpose of many these artifacts remains unknown. Research in this area has been limited because channelers have been killed or burned out when experimenting with *ter'angreal* of unknown purpose. *See also* *angreal*; *sa'angreal*.

Tigraine (*ti-GRĀN*): As Daughter-heir of Andor, she married Taringail Damodred and bore his son Galadreid. Her disappearance in 972 NE led to the struggle in Andor called the Succession, and caused the events in Cairhien which eventually brought on the Aiel War. Her sign was a woman's hand gripping a thorny rose-stem with a white blossom.

Time of Madness: *See* Breaking of the World.

Tinkers: *See* Tuatha'an.

Traveling People: *See* Tuatha'an.

Trolloc Wars: A series of wars, beginning around 1000 AB and lasting more than three hundred years, during which trolloc armies ravaged Asur

from the north. Eventually the trollocs were slain or driven back into the Great Blight, but some nations were almost depopulated, and others ceased to exist altogether. All records of the time are fragmentary. *See also* Covenant of the Ten Nations.

trollocs (*TRAAL-əks*): Creatures of the Dark One. Trollocs are descended from humans who lived in what is now the Great Blight. Proximity to the Dark One infected and deformed them over generations until they were no longer recognizably human. Trollocs are extremely violent and seem to have limited cognitive and verbal abilities, though they do have their own language (*see* Væ'alza; Djevik K' Shar). Their skin is snow white, and is often cracked, peeling, or sloughing off, exposing grey flesh below. They have white hair, which grows in strips or ribbons instead of strands. Trollocs often adorn their faces and bodies with rough piercings, in which they wear all manner of pins, hoops, and other items. They are nocturnal and sensitive to bright light.

True Source: The True Source is where the Creator stood and brought the world forth. It exists outside of time and space. It is nowhere and everywhere at once. From the True Source flows the One Power, which turns the Wheel of Time, which weaves the Pattern of the Ages. To channel the Power, one must be able to touch the Source. *See also* One Power.

Tuatha'an (*too-AA-thə-AAN*): A wandering people, also known as the Tinkers and as the Traveling People, who live in wagons and follow a totally pacifist philosophy called the Way of the Leaf. Things mended by Tinkers are often better than new, but the Tuatha'an are shunned by many villages because of stories that they steal children and try to convert young people to their beliefs.

Væ'alza (*vī-AL-zə*): In the trolloc tongue, "Heart of the Dark." Believed to be the trolloc name for the Dark One.

Valdar Mael (*VAL-dar mī-EL*): *See* dreadlords.

Village Council: In Two Rivers villages, a group of men selected by fellow townsmen and headed by a Mayor, that is responsible for deciding such

public matters as are considered solely men's responsibility, like negotiating with the Councils of other villages over matters which affect the villages jointly. Often at odds with the Women's Circle. *See also* Women's Circle.

War of the Hundred Years: A series of overlapping wars among constantly shifting alliances, precipitated by the death of Artur Hawkwing and the resulting struggle for his empire. It lasted from FY 994 to FY 1117. The war depopulated large parts of the lands between the Aryth Ocean and the Aiel Waste, from the Sea of Storms to the Great Blight. So great was the destruction that only fragmentary records of the time remain. The empire of Artur Hawkwing was pulled apart, and the nations of the present day were formed.

War of the Shadow: The war that ended the Age of Legends. The War of the Shadow, also known as the War of Power, began shortly after an attempt to free the Dark One from its prison. Before long it involved the whole world, ended end until Lews Therin and his Hundred Companions resealed the Dark One's prison. The decisive battle resulted in the taint on *saidin*, beginning the Time of Madness and the Breaking of the World.

warder: A warrior bonded to an Aes Sedai. The bonding is a thing of the One Power, and by it he gains such gifts as quick healing, the ability to go long periods without food, water or rest, and the ability to sense the taint of the Dark One at a distance. So long as a warder lives, the Aes Sedai to whom he is bonded knows he is alive however far away he is, and when he dies she will know the moment and manner of his death. Attitudes toward warders vary by Ajah, with most allowing each member to take a warder or not, as she prefers. The Red Ajah, however, frowns upon warders altogether, while the Green encourages members to bond as many warders as they wish. Ethically, the warder must accede to the bonding, but it has been known to be done involuntarily. What the Aes Sedai gain from the bonding is a closely held secret. *See also* Aes Sedai.

Web of Destiny: *See ta'maral'ailen.*

Wheel of Time: Time is a wheel with seven spokes, each spoke an Age. As the Wheel turns, the Ages come and go, each leaving memories that fade to legend, then to myth, and are forgotten by the time that Age comes again. The Pattern of an Age is slightly different each time an Age comes, and each time it is subject to greater change, but each time it is the same Age.

White Ajah: *See* Ajah.

White Tower: The palace of the Amyrlin Seat in Tar Valon.

Whiteloaks: *See* Children of the Light.

Wilder: A woman who has learned to channel the One Power on her own, without formal White Tower training. Such women usually manage only a rough control of the Power and lack particular skill. Used derogatorily by Aes Sedai.

Wisdom: In Two Rivers villages, a woman chosen by the Women's Circle to sit at its head. Wisdoms are selected for their skills at healing, knowledge of weather and agriculture, and their good sense and leadership. The Wisdom is the equal and the counterpart of the Mayor, though unlike the Mayor, she is chosen for life. It is very rare for a Wisdom to be removed from office. *See also* Women's Circle.

Women's Circle: A group of women selected by the women of a village, responsible for deciding such matters as are considered solely women's responsibility, like when to plant the crops and when to harvest. Equal in authority to the Village Council, with clearly delineated lines and areas of responsibility. Often at odds with the Village Council. *See also* Village Council.