

GLIMMERS

THE PROLOGUE TO

CROSSROADS OF TWILIGHT

Sequel
to the #1
New York
Times
Bestseller
Winter's Heart

Book Ten
of
*THE WHEEL
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Robert
Jordan

BOOK

TEN IN THE WHEEL OF TIME™

GLIMMERS

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CROSSROADS
OF TWILIGHT

Robert Jordan

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Hi, everybody.

I hope you enjoy this early look at *Crossroads of Twilight*. "Shimmers" being the prologue, of course. I'm hard at work even as you read this, and I expect to complete the new book soon. For now, enjoy "Shimmers."

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GLIMMERS OF THE PATTERN

Prologue

Rodel Ituralde hated waiting, though he well knew it was the largest part of being a soldier. Waiting for the next battle, for the enemy to move, to make a mistake. He watched the winter forest and was as still as the trees. The sun stood halfway to its peak, and gave no warmth. His breath misted white in front of his face, frosting his neatly trimmed mustache and the black fox-fur lining his hood. He was glad that his helmet hung at his pommel. His breastplate held the cold and radiated it through his coat and all the layers of wool, silk and linen beneath. Even Dart's saddle felt cold, as though the white gelding were made of frozen milk. The helmet would have addled his brain.

Winter had come late to Arad Doman, very late, but with a vengeance. From summer heat that lingered unnaturally into fall, to winter's heart in less than a month. The leaves that had survived the long summer's drought had been frozen before they could change color, and now they glistened like strange, ice-covered emeralds in the morning sun. The horses of the twenty-odd armymen around him occasionally stamped a hoof in the knee-deep snow. It had been a long ride this far, and they had further to go whether this day turned out good or ill. Dark clouds roiled the sky to northward. He did not need his weather-wise there to tell him the temperature would plummet before nightfall. They had to be under shelter by then.

"Not as rough as winter before last, is it, my Lord?" Jaalam said quietly. The tall young officer had a way of reading Ituralde's mind, and his voice was pitched for the others to hear. "Even so, I suppose some men would be dreaming of mulled wine about now. Not this lot, of course. Remarkably abstemious. They all drink tea, I believe. Cold tea. If they had a few birch switches, they'd be stripping down for snow-baths."

"They'll have to keep their clothes on for the time being," Ituralde replied drily, "but they might get some cold tea tonight, if they're lucky." That brought a few chuckles. Quiet chuckles. He had chosen these men with care, and they knew about noise at the wrong time.

He himself could have done with a steaming cup of spiced wine, or even tea. But it was a long time since merchants had

brought tea to Arad Doman. A long time since any outland merchant had ventured further than the border with Saldaea. By the time news of the outside world reached him, it was as stale as last month's bread, if it was more than rumor to begin. That hardly mattered, though. If the White Tower truly was divided against itself, or men who could channel really were being called to Caemlyn . . . well, the world would have to do without Rodel Ituralde until Arad Doman was whole again. For the moment, Arad Doman was more than enough for any sane man to go on with.

Once again he reviewed the orders he had sent, carried by the fastest riders he had, to every noble loyal to the King. Divided as they were by bad blood and old feuds, they still shared that much. They would gather their armies and ride when orders came from the Wolf; at least, so long as he held the King's favor. They would even hide in the mountains and wait, at his order. Oh, they would chafe, and some would curse his name, but they would obey. They knew the Wolf won battles. More, they knew he won wars. The Little Wolf, they called him when they thought he could not hear, but he did not care whether they drew attention to his stature—well, not much—so long as they rode when and where he said.

Very soon they would be riding hard, moving to set a trap that would not spring for months. It was a long chance he was taking. Complex plans had many ways to fall apart, and this plan had layers inside layers. Everything would be ruined before it began if he failed to provide the bait. Or if

someone ignored his order to evade couriers from the King. They all knew his reasons, though, and even the most stiff-necked shared them, though few were willing to speak of the matter aloud. He himself had moved like a wraith racing on a storm since he received Alsalam's latest command. In his sleeve the folded paper lay tucked above the pale lace that fell onto his steel-backed gauntlet. They had one last chance, one very small chance, to save Arad Doman. Perhaps even to save Alsalam from himself before the Council of Merchants decided to put another man on the throne in his place. He had been a good ruler, for over twenty years. The Light send that he could be again.

A loud crack to the south sent Ituralde's hand to the hilt of his longsword. There was a faint creak of leather and metal as others eased their weapons. For the rest, silence. The forest was as still as a frozen tomb. Only a limb breaking under the weight of snow. After a moment, he let himself relax—as much as he had relaxed since the tales came north of the Dragon Reborn appearing in the sky at Falme. Perhaps the man really was the Dragon Reborn, perhaps he really had appeared in the sky, but whatever the truth, those tales had set Arad Doman on fire.

Ituralde was sure he could have put out that fire, given a freer hand. It was not boasting to think so. He knew what he could do, with a battle, a campaign, or a war. But ever since the Council had decided the King would be safer smuggled out of Bandar Eban, Alsalam seemed to have taken into his head that he was the rebirth of Artur Hawk-

wing. His signature and seal had marked scores of battle orders since, flooding out from wherever the Council had him hidden. They would not say where that was, even to Ituralde himself. Every woman on the Council that he confronted went flat-eyed and evasive at any mention of the King. He could almost believe they did not know where Alsalam was. A ridiculous thought, of course. The Council kept an unblinking eye on the King. Ituralde had always believed the merchant Houses interfered too much, yet he wished they would interfere now. Why they remained silent was a mystery, for a king who damaged trade did not remain long on the throne.

He was loyal to his oaths, and Alsalam was a friend, besides, but the orders the King sent could not have been better written to achieve chaos. Nor could they be ignored. Alsalam was the King. But he had commanded Ituralde to march north with all possible speed against a great gathering of Dragonsworn that Alsalam supposedly knew of from secret spies; then ten days later, with no Dragonsworn yet in sight, an order came to move south again, with all possible speed, against another gathering that never materialized. He had been commanded to concentrate his forces to defend Bandar Eban when a three-pronged attack might have ended it all and to divide them when a hammer blow could have done the same, to harry ground he knew the Dragonsworn had abandoned, and to march away from where he knew they camped. Worse, Alsalam's orders often had gone directly to the powerful nobles who were supposed to be fol-

lowing Ituralde, sending Machir in this direction, Teacal in that, Rahman in a third. Four times, pitched battles had resulted from parts of the army blundering into one another in the night while moving to the King's express command and expecting none but enemies ahead. And all the while the Dragonsworn gained numbers, and confidence. Ituralde had had his triumphs—at Solanje and Maseen, at Lake Somal and Kandelmar—the Lords of Katar had learned not to sell the products of their mines and forges to the enemies of Arad Doman—but always, Alsalam's orders wasted his gains.

This last order was different, though. For one thing, a Gray Man had killed Lady Tuva trying to stop it from reaching him. Why the Shadow might fear this order more than any other was a mystery, yet it was all the more reason to move swiftly. Before Alsalam reached him with another. This order opened many possibilities, and he had considered every last one he could see. But good ones all started here, today. When small chances of success were all that remained, you had to seize them.

A snowjay's strident cry rang out in the distance, then a second time, a third. Cupping his hands around his mouth, Ituralde repeated the three harsh calls. Moments later a shaggy, pale dapple gelding appeared out of the trees, his rider in a white cloak streaked with black. Man and horse alike would have been hard to see in the snowy forest had they been standing still. The rider pulled up beside Ituralde. A stocky man, he wore only a single sword, with a short

blade, and there was a cased bow and a quiver fastened to his saddle.

"Looks like they all came, my Lord," he said in his permanently hoarse voice, pushing his cowl back from his head. Someone had tried to hang Donjel when he was young, though the reason was lost in the years. What remained of his short-cropped hair was iron gray. The dark leather patch covering the socket of his right eye was a remnant of another youthful scrape. One eye or two, though, he was the best scout Ituralde had ever known. "Most, anyways," he went on. "They put two rings of sentries around the lodge, one inside the other. You can see them a mile off, but nobody will get close without them at the lodge hearing of it in time to get away. By the tracks, they didn't bring no more men than you said they could, not enough to count. Course," he added wryly, "that still leaves you outnumbered a fair bit."

Ituralde nodded. He had offered the White Ribbon, and the men he was to meet had accepted. Three days when men pledged under the Light, by their souls and hope of salvation, not to draw a weapon against another or shed blood. The White Ribbon had not been tested in this war, however, and these days, some men had strange ideas of where salvation lay. Those who called themselves Dragonsworn, for instance. He had always been called a gambler, though he was not. The trick was in knowing what risks you could take. And sometimes, in knowing which ones you had to take.

Pulling a packet sewn into oiled silk from his boottop, he

handed it to Donjel. "If I don't reach Coron Ford in two days, take this to my wife."

The scout tucked the packet somewhere beneath his cloak, touched his forehead, and turned his horse west. He had carried its like for Ituralde before, usually on the eve of battle. The Light send this was not the time Tamsin would have to open that packet. She would come after him—she had told him so—the first incident ever of the living haunting the dead.

"Jaalam," Ituralde said, "let us see what waits at Lady Osana's hunting lodge." As he heeled Dart forward, the other fell in behind him.

The sun rose to its height and began again to descend as they rode. The dark clouds in the north moved closer, and the chill bit deeper. There was no sound but the crunch of hooves breaking through the snowcrust. The forest seemed empty save for themselves. He did not see any of the sentries Donjel had spoken of. The man's opinion of what could be seen from a mile differed from that of most. They would be expecting him, of course. And watching to make sure he was not followed by an army, White Ribbon or no White Ribbon. A good many of them likely had reasons they felt sufficient to feather Rodel Ituralde with arrows. A lord might pledge the White Ribbon for his men, but would all of those feel bound? Sometimes, there were chances you just had to take.

About mid-afternoon, Osana's so-called hunting lodge loomed suddenly out of the trees, a mass of pale towers and

slender, pointed domes that would have fitted well among the palaces of Bandar Eban itself. Her hunting had always been for men or power, her trophies numerous and noteworthy despite her relative youth, and the "hunts" that had taken place here would have raised eyebrows even in the capital. The lodge lay desolate, now. Broken windows gaped like mouths with jagged teeth. None showed a glimmer of light or movement. The snow covering the cleared ground around the lodge had been well-trampled by horses, however. The ornate brass-bound gates of the main courtyard stood open, and he rode through without slowing, followed by his men. The horses' hooves clattered on the paving stones, where the snow had been beaten to slush.

No servants came out to greet him, not that he had expected any. Osana had vanished early in the troubles that now shook Arad Doman like a dog shaking a rat, and her servants had drifted quickly to others of her house, taking whatever places they could find. These days, the masterless starved, or turned bandit. Or Dragonsworn. Dismounting in front of the broad marble stairway at the end of the courtyard, he handed Dart's reins to one of his armstrongs, and Jaalam ordered the men to take shelter where they could find it for themselves and the animals. Eyeing the marble balconies and wide windows that surrounded the courtyard, they moved as if expecting a crossbow bolt between the shoulderblades. One set of stable doors stood slightly ajar, but in spite of the cold, they divided themselves between the corners of the courtyard, huddling with the horses where

they could keep watch in every direction. If the worst came, perhaps a few might make it out.

Removing his gauntlets, he tucked them behind his belt and checked his lace as he climbed the stairs with Jaalam. Snow that had been trodden underfoot and frozen again cracked beneath his boots. He refrained from looking anywhere but straight ahead. He must appear supremely assured, as though there were no possibility events should go other than he expected. Confidence was one key to victory. The other side believing you were confident was sometimes almost as good as actually being confident. At the head of the stairs, Jaalam pulled open one of the tall, carved doors by its gilded ring. Ituralde touched his beauty-spot with a finger to make sure it was in place—his cheeks were too cold to feel the black velvet star clinging—before he stepped inside. As self-assured as he would have been at a ball.

The cavernous entry hall was as icy as the outside. Their breath made feathered mists. Unlit, the space seemed already wreathed in twilight. The floor was a colorful mosaic of hunters and animals, the tiles chipped in places, as though heavy weights had been dragged over them, or perhaps dropped. Aside from a single toppled plinth that might once have held a large vase or a small statue, the hall was bare. What the servants had not taken when they fled had long since been looted by bandits. A single man awaited them, white-haired and more gaunt than when Ituralde had last seen him. His breastplate was battered, and his earring was

just a small gold hoop, but his lace was immaculate, and the sparkling red quarter moon beside his left eye would have gone well at court, in better times.

"By the Light, be welcome under the White Ribbon, Lord Ituralde," he said formally, with a slight bow.

"By the Light, I come under the White Ribbon, Lord Shimron," Ituralde replied, making his courtesy in return. Shimron had been one of Alsalam's most trusted advisers. Until he joined the Dragonsworn, at least. Now he stood high in their councils. "My armsman is Jaalam Nishur, honor-bound to House Ituralde, as are all who came with me."

There had been no House Ituralde before Rodel, but Shimron answered Jaalam's bow, hand to heart. "Honor be to honor. Will you accompany me, Lord Ituralde?" he said as he straightened.

The great doors to the ballroom were gone from their hinges, though Ituralde could hardly imagine bandits looting those, for they left a tall pointed arch wide enough for ten men to pass. Within the windowless oval room, half a hundred lanterns of every size and sort beat at shadows, though the light barely reached the domed ceiling. Separated by a wide expanse of floor, two groups of men stood against the painted walls, and if the White Ribbon had induced them to leave off helmets, all two hundred or more were armored otherwise, and certainly no one had put aside his swords. To one side were a few Domani lords as powerful as Shimron—Rajabi, Wakeda, Ankaer—each surrounded by his cluster of lesser lords and sworn commoners, and smaller clusters, as

few as two or three, many containing no nobles at all. The Dragonsworn had councils, but no one commander. Still, each of those men was a leader in his own right, some counting their followers in scores, a few in thousands. None appeared happy to be where he was, and one or two shot glares across the floor, to where fifty or sixty Taraboners stood in one solid mass and scowled back. Dragonsworn they might all be, yet there was little love lost between Domani and Taraboners. Ituralde almost smiled at the sight of the outlanders, though. He had not dared to count on half so many appearing today.

"Lord Rodel Ituralde comes under the White Ribbon." Shimron's voice rang through the lantern-shadows. "Let whoever may think of violence search his heart, and consider his soul." And that was the end of formality.

"Why does Lord Ituralde offer the White Ribbon?" Wakeda demanded, one hand gripping the hilt of his longsword and the other in a fist at his side. He was not a tall man, though taller than Ituralde, but as haughty as if he held the throne himself. Women had called him beautiful, once. Now, a slanting black scarf covered the socket of his missing right eye, and his beauty-spot was a black arrowhead pointing at the thick scar running from his cheek up onto his forehead. "Does he intend to join us? Or ask us to surrender? All know the Wolf is bold as well as devious. Is he that bold?" A rumble rose among the men on his side of the room, part mirth, part anger.

Ituralde clasped his hands behind his back to keep from

fingering the ruby in his left ear. That was widely known as a sign that he was angry, and sometimes he did it on purpose, but he needed to present a calm face, now. Even while the man spoke past his ear! No. Calm. Duels were entered into in anger, but he was here to fight a duel, and that required calm.

"Every man here knows we have another enemy to the south," he said in a steady voice. "The Seanchan have swallowed Tarabon." He ran his gaze over the Taraboners, and met flat stares. He never had been able to read Taraboners' faces. Between those preposterous mustaches—like hairy tusks; worse than a Saldaean's!—and those ridiculous veils, they might as well wear masks, and the poor light from the lanterns did not help. But he had seen them veiled in mail, and he needed them. "They have flooded onto Almoth Plain, and moved ever north. Their intent is clear. They mean to have Arad Doman, too. They mean to have the whole world, I fear."

"Does Lord Ituralde want to know who we will support if these Seanchan invade us?" Wakeda demanded.

"I have true faith you will fight for Arad Doman, Lord Wakeda," Ituralde said mildly. Wakeda went purple at having the direct insult flung in his teeth, and his oath-men's hands went to hilts.

"Refugees have brought word that there are Aiel on the plain, now," Shimron put in quickly, as though he feared Wakeda might break the White Ribbon. None of Wakeda's oath-men would draw steel unless he did, or commanded

them to. "They fight for the Dragon Reborn, so say the reports. He must have sent them, perhaps as an aid to us. No one has ever defeated an Aiel army, not even Artur Hawkwing. You recall the Blood Snow, Lord Ituralde, when we were younger? I believe you agree with me that we did not defeat them there, whatever the histories may say, and I cannot believe the Seanchan have the numbers we did then. I myself have heard of Seanchan moving south, away from the border. No, I suspect the next we hear will be of them *retreating* from the plain, not advancing on us." He was not a bad commander in the field, but he had always been pedantic.

Ituralde smiled. Word came more swiftly from the south than from anywhere else, but he had been afraid he would have to bring up the Aiel, and they might have thought he was trying to trick them. He could hardly believe it himself, Aiel on Almoth Plain. He did not point out that Aiel sent to help the Dragonsworn were more likely to have appeared in Arad Doman itself. "I've questioned refugees, too, and they speak of Aiel raids, not armies. Whatever the Aiel are doing on the plain may have slowed the Seanchan, but it hasn't turned them back. Their flying beasts have begun scouting on our side of the border. That does not smack of retreat."

Producing the paper from his sleeve with a flourish, he held it up so all could see the Sword and Hand impressed in green-and-blue wax. As always of late, he had used a hot blade to separate the Royal Seal on one side while leaving it whole, so he could show it unbroken to doubters. There had

been plenty of those, when they heard some of Alsalam's orders. "I have orders from King Alsalam to gather as many men as I can, from wherever I can find them, and strike as hard as I can at the Seanchan." He took a deep breath. Here, he took another chance, and Alsalam might have his head on the block unless the dice fell the right way. "I offer a truce. I pledge in the King's name not to move against you in any way so long as the Seanchan remain a threat to Arad Doman, if you will all pledge the same and fight beside me against them until they are beaten back."

A stunned silence answered him. Bull-necked Rajabi appeared poleaxed. Wakeda chewed his lip like a startled girl.

Then Shimron muttered, "Can they *be* beaten back, Lord Ituralde? I faced their . . . their chained Aes Sedai on Almoth Plain, as did you." Boots scraped the floor as men shifted their feet, and faces darkened in bleak anger. No man liked to think he was helpless before an enemy, but enough had been there in the early days, with Ituralde and Shimron, for all to know what this enemy was like.

"They can be defeated, Lord Shimron," Ituralde replied, "even with their . . . little surprises." A strange thing to call the earth erupting under your feet, and scouts that rode what looked like Shadowspawn, but he had to sound assured as well as look it. Besides, when you knew what the enemy could do, you adapted. That had been one core of warfare long before the Seanchan appeared. Darkness cut the Seanchan advantages, and so did storms, and a weather-

wise could always tell you when a storm was coming. "A wise man stops chewing when he reaches bone," he continued, "but so far, the Seanchan have had their meat sliced thin before they reached for it. I intend to give them a tough roast to gnaw. More, I have a plan to make them snap so fast they'll break their teeth on bone before they have a mouthful of meat. Now. I have pledged. Will you?"

It was hard not to hold his breath. Each man seemed to be looking inward. He could all but see them mulling it over. The Wolf had a plan. The Seanchan had chained Aes Sedai and flying beasts and the Light alone knew what else. But the Wolf had a plan. The Seanchan. The Wolf.

"If any man can defeat them," Shimron said finally, "you can, Lord Ituralde. I will so pledge."

"I *do* so pledge!" Rajabi shouted. "We'll chase them back across the ocean where they came from!" He had a bull's temperament as well as its neck.

Surprisingly, Wakeda thundered his agreement with equal enthusiasm, and then a storm of voices broke, calling that they would match the King's pledge, that they would smash the Seanchan, even some that they would follow the Wolf into the Pit of Doom. All very gratifying, but not all Ituralde had come for.

"If you ask *us* to fight for Arad Doman," one voice shouted above the rest, "then ask *us*!" The men who had been calling their pledges fell to angry mutters and half-heard curses.

Hiding his pleasure behind a bland expression, Ituralde turned to face the speaker, on the other side of the room. The

Taraboner was a lean man, with a sharp nose that made a tent of his veil. His eyes were hard, though, and keen. Some of the other Taraboners frowned as if displeased he had spoken, so it appeared they had no one leader any more than the Domani, but he had spoken. Ituralde had hoped for the pledges he had received, but they were not necessary to his plan. The Taraboners were. At least, they would make it a hundred times more likely to work. He addressed the man courteously, with a bow.

"I offer you the chance to fight for Tarabon, my good Lord. The Aiel are making some confusion on the plain; the refugees speak of it. Tell me, could a small company of your men—a hundred, perhaps two—cross the plain in that disorder and enter Tarabon, if their armor was marked with stripes, as those who ride for the Seanchan?"

It seemed impossible the Taraboner's face could grow any tighter, yet it did, and it was the turn of the men on his side of the room to mutter angrily and curse. Enough word had come north for them to know of a King and Panarch put on their thrones by the Seanchan and swearing fealty to an Empress on the other side of the Aryth Ocean. They could not like reminders of how many of their countrymen now rode for this Empress. Most of the "Seanchan" on Almoth Plain were Taraboners.

"What good could one small company do?" the lean man growled, contemptuous.

"Little good," Ituralde replied. "But if there were fifty such companies? A hundred?" These Taraboners might

have that many men behind them, all told. "If they all struck on the same day, all across Tarabon? I myself would ride with them, and as many of my men as can be outfitted in Taraboner armor. Just so you will know this is not simply a stratagem to get rid of you."

Behind him, the Domani began protesting loudly. Wakeda the loudest of all, if it could be believed! The Wolf's plan was all very well, but they wanted the Wolf himself at their head. Most of the Taraboners began arguing among themselves, over whether so many men could cross the plain without being discovered, even in such small bands, over what good, if any, they could do in Tarabon in small companies, over whether they were willing to wear armor marked with Seanchan stripes. Taraboners argued as easily as Saldaeans, and as hotly. Not the sharp-nosed man. He met Ituralde's gaze steadily. Then gave a slight nod. It was hard to tell, behind those thick mustaches, but Ituralde thought he smiled.

The last tension faded from Ituralde's shoulders. The fellow would not have agreed while the others argued if he were not more of a leader among them than he seemed. The others would come, too, he was certain. They would ride south with him into the heart of what the Seanchan considered their own, and slap them hard and full across the face. The Taraboners would want to stay afterwards, of course, and continue the fight in their own homeland. He could not expect anything more. Which would leave him and the few thousand men he could take with him to be

hounded back north again, all the long way across Almoth Plain. If the Light shone on him, hounded with fury.

He returned the Taraboner's smile, if smile it was. With any luck, furious generals would not see where he was leading them until it was too late. And if they did . . . Well, he had a second plan.

Eamon Valda held his cloak tight around himself as he tramped through the snow among the trees. Cold and steady, the wind sighed through the snow-laden branches, a deceptively quiet sound in the damp gray light. It sliced through the thick white wool as through gauze, chilling him to the bone. The camp sprawling around him through the forest was too quiet. Movement provided a little warmth, but in this, men huddled together unless driven to move.

Abruptly he stopped in his tracks, wrinkling his nose at a sudden stench, a gagging foulness like twenty midden heaps crawling with maggots. He did not gag; instead, he scowled. The camp lacked the precision he preferred. The tents were clustered haphazardly wherever the limbs overhead grew thickest, the horses tethered close by rather than properly picketed. It was the sort of slackness that led to filth. Unwatched, the men would bury horsedung under a few shovels of dirt to be done with it quicker, and dig latrines where they would not have to walk far in the cold. Any officer of his who allowed that would cease to be an officer, and learn firsthand how to use a shovel.

He was scanning the camp for the source of the smell, when suddenly there was no smell. The wind did not change; the stink just vanished. He was startled for only a moment. Walking on, he scowled all the harder. The stench had come from *somewhere*. He would find whoever thought discipline had slackened, and make examples of them. Discipline had to be tight, now; tighter than ever.

At the edge of a broad clearing, he paused again. The snow in the clearing was smooth and unmarked despite the camp hidden all around it. Staying back among the trees, he scanned the sky. Scudding gray clouds hid the noonday sun. A flicker of motion made his breath catch before he realized it was just a bird, some small brown thing wary of hawks and staying low. He barked a laugh that was more than touched with bitterness. Little more than a month since the Light-cursed Seanchan had swallowed Amador and the Fortress of Light in one unbelievable gulp, but he had learned new instincts. Wise men learned, while fools . . .

Ailron had been a fool, puffed up with old tales of glory brightened by age and new hope of winning real power to go with his crown. He refused to see the reality in front of his eyes, and Ailron's Disaster had been the result. Valda had heard it named the Battle of Jeramel, but only by some of the bare handful of Amadician nobles who escaped, dazed as poleaxed steers yet still trying mechanically to put the best face on events. He wondered what Ailron had called it when the Seanchan's tame witches began tearing his orderly ranks to bloody rags. He could still see that in his head, the

earth turning to fountains of fire. He saw it in his dreams. Well, Ailron was dead, cut down trying to flee the field and his head displayed on a Taraboner's lance. A suitable death for a fool. He, on the other hand, had over nine thousand of the Children gathered around him. A man who saw clearly could make much out of that in times like these.

On the far side of the clearing, just inside the treeline, was a rude house that had once belonged to a charcoal burner, a single room with winter-brown weeds thick in the gaps between the stones. By all appearances, the man had abandoned the place some time ago; parts of the thatch roof sagged dangerously, and whatever had once filled the narrow windows was long since gone, replaced now by dark blankets. Two guards stood beside the ill-fitting wooden door, big men with the scarlet shepherd's crook behind the golden sunflare on their cloaks. They had their arms wrapped around themselves and were stamping their boots against the cold. Neither could have reached his sword in time to do any good, had Valda been an enemy. Questioners liked to work indoors.

Their faces might have been carved stone as they watched him approach. Neither offered more than a halfhearted salute. Not for a man without the shepherd's crook, even if he was Lord-Captain Commander of the Children. One opened his mouth as if to question Valda's purpose, but Valda walked by them and pushed open the rough door. At least they did not try to stop him. He would have killed them both, if they had.

At his entrance, Asunawa looked up from the crooked table where he was perusing a small book, one bony hand cupped around a steaming pewter cup that gave off the odor of spices. His ladder-backed chair, the only other piece of furniture in the room, appeared rickety, but someone had strengthened it with rawhide lashings. Valda tightened his mouth to stop a sneer. The High Inquisitor of the Hand of the Light demanded a real roof, not a tent, even if it was thatch sorely in need of patching, and mulled wine when no one else had tasted wine of any sort in a week. A small fire burned on the stone hearth, too, giving a meager warmth. Even cookfires had been banned since before the Disaster, to prevent smoke from giving them away. Still, although most Children despised the Questioners, they held Asunawa in a strange esteem, as if his gray hair and gaunt martyr's face graced him with all the ideals of the Children of the Light. That had been a surprise, when Valda first learned of it; he was unsure whether Asunawa himself knew. In any case, there were enough Questioners to make trouble. Nothing he could not handle, but it was best to avoid that sort of trouble. For now.

"It is almost time," he said, shutting the door behind him. "Are you ready?"

Asunawa made no move to rise or reach for the white cloak folded across the table beside him. There was no sun-flare on that, just the scarlet crook. Instead, he folded his hands over the book, hiding the pages. Valda thought it was Mantelar's *The Way of the Light*. Odd reading for the

High Inquisitor. More suited to new recruits; those who could not read when they swore were taught so they could study Mantelar's words. "I have reports of an Andoran army in Murandy, my son," Asunawa said. "Deep in Murandy, perhaps."

"Murandy is a long way from here," Valda said as though he did not recognize an old argument starting anew. An argument that Asunawa often seemed to forget he had already lost. But what were Andorans doing in Murandy? If the reports were true; so many were travelers' fantasies wrapped in lies. Andor. The very name rankled in Valda's memory. Morgase was dead, or else a servant to some Seanchan. They had little respect for titles other than their own. Dead or a servant, she was lost to him, and more importantly by far, his plans for Andor were lost. Galadedrid had gone from a useful lever to just another young officer, and one who was too popular with the common soldiers. Good officers were never popular. But Valda was a pragmatic man. The past was the past. New plans had replaced Andor.

"Not so far if we move east, across Altara, my son, across the north of Altara. The Seanchan cannot have moved far from Ebou Dar yet."

Spreading his hands to catch the hearthfire's small warmth, Valda sighed. They had advanced like a plague in Tarabon, and here in Amadicia. Why did the man think Altara was different? "Are you forgetting the witches in Altara? With an army of their own, need I remind you? Unless they're into Murandy by now." Those reports he

believed, of the witches on the move. In spite of himself, his voice rose. "Maybe this so-called Andoran army you've heard about is the witches, and their army! They gave Caemlyn to al'Thor, remember! And Illian, and half the east! Do you really believe the witches are divided? Do you?" Slowly he drew a deep breath, calming himself. Trying to. Every tale out of the east was worse than the last. A gust of wind down the chimney blew sparks into the room, and he stepped back with a curse. Bloody peasant hovel! Even the chimney was ill-made!

Asunawa snapped the small book shut between his palms. His hands were folded as in prayer, but his deep-set eyes suddenly seemed hotter than the fire. "I believe the witches must be destroyed! That is what I believe!"

"I'd settle for knowing how the Seanchan tame them." With enough tame witches, he could drive al'Thor out of Andor, out of Illian and everywhere else he had settled like the Shadow itself. He could better Hawkwing himself!

"They must be destroyed," Asunawa asserted stubbornly. "And us with them?" Valda demanded.

A knock came at the door, and at Asunawa's curt summons one of the guards from outside appeared in the doorway, standing rigidly erect, arm snapping across his chest in a crisp salute. "My Lord High Inquisitor," he said respectfully, "the Council of the Anointed is here."

Valda waited. Would the old fool continue to be stubborn with all ten surviving Lords Captain outside, mounted and

ready to ride? What was done, was done. What had to be done.

"If it brings down the White Tower," Asunawa said finally, "I can be content. For now. I will come to this meeting."

Valda smiled thinly. "Then I am content. We will see the witches fall together." Certainly, he would see them fall. "I suggest you have your horse readied. We have a long way to ride by nightfall." Whether Asunawa would see it with him was another matter.

Gabrelle enjoyed her rides through the wintery woods with Logain and Toveine. He always let Toveine and her follow at their own pace in a semblance of privacy, so long as they did not lag too far behind. The two Aes Sedai seldom spoke more than absolutely necessary, though, even when they truly were private. They were far from friends. In fact, Gabrelle often wished Toveine would ask to stay behind when Logain offered these outings. It would have been very pleasant to be really alone.

Holding her reins in one green-gloved hand and keeping her fox-lined cloak shut with the other, she let herself feel the cold, just a little, just for the refreshing vigor of it. The snow was not deep, but the morning air was crisp. Dark gray clouds promised more snow, soon. High overhead flew a long-winged bird of some sort. An eagle, perhaps; birds were not her strong point. Plants and minerals stayed in one place while you studied them, and so did books and manu-

scripts, though those might crumble under her fingers, if they were old enough. She could barely make the bird out at that height, in any case, but an eagle fit the landscape. Woodland surrounded them, small dense thickets dotted among more widely spaced trees. Great oaks and towering pines and firs had killed off most of the undergrowth, though here and there the thick brown remains of a hardy vine, waiting for a still distant spring, clung to a boulder or a low gray ledge of stone. She carefully held that landscape in her mind like a novice exercise, chill and empty.

With no one in sight except her two companions, she could almost imagine she was somewhere other than the Black Tower. That horrid name came all too easily to mind, now. A thing as real as the White Tower, and no longer “so-called” for anyone who laid eyes on the great stone barracks buildings that held hundreds of men in training, and the village that had grown up around them. She had lived in that village for nearly two weeks, and there were parts of the Black Tower she still had not seen. Its grounds covered miles, surrounded by the beginnings of a wall of black stone. Still, she could almost forget, here in the woods.

Almost, except for the bundle of sensation and emotion, the essence of Logain Ablar, that always rode in the back of her mind, a constant feel of controlled wariness, of muscles always on the edge of tensing. A hunting wolf might feel that way, or perhaps a lion. The man’s head moved constantly; even here he watched his surroundings as though expecting attack.

She had never had a Warder—they were needless flamboyance for Browns; a hired servant could do all she needed—and it felt peculiar to be not only part of a bond, but at the wrong end of it, so to speak. Worse than simply the wrong end; *this* bond required her to obey, and she was hedged about with prohibitions. So it was not the same as a Warder bond, really. Sisters did not *force* their Warders to obedience. Well, not very often. And sisters had not bonded men against their will for centuries. Still, it did provide a fascinating study. She had worked at interpreting what she sensed. At times, she could almost read his mind. Other times, it was like fumbling through a mineshaft with no lamp. She supposed she would try to study if her neck were stretched on the headsman's block. Which, in a very real way, it was. He could sense her as well as she could him.

She must always remember that. Some of the Asha'man might believe the Aes Sedai were resigned to their captivity, but only a fool could think fifty-one sisters who had been forcibly bonded would all embrace resignation, and Logain was no fool. Besides, he knew they had been sent to destroy the Black Tower. Yet if he suspected that they were still trying to find a way to end the threat of hundreds of men who could channel . . . Light, constrained as they were, one order could halt them in their tracks! You will do nothing to harm the Black Tower. She could not understand why that command had not been given as a simple precaution. They must succeed. Fail, and the world was doomed.

Logain turned in his saddle, an imposing, broad-shouldered figure in a well-fitting coat dark as pitch, without a touch of color save for the silver Sword and the red-and-gold Dragon on his high collar. His black cloak was thrown back, as though he were refusing to let the cold touch him. He might be; these men seemed to believe they had to fight everything, all the time. He smiled at her—reassuringly?—and she blinked. Had she let too much anxiety slip into her end of the bond? It was such a delicate dance, trying to control her emotions, to present just the right responses. It was almost like taking the test for the shawl, where every weave had to be made exactly so, without the slightest falter, despite every manner of distraction, only this test went on and on and on.

He turned his attention on Toveine, and Gabrelle exhaled softly. Just a smile, then. A companionable gesture. He was often congenial. He might have been likable if he were anything but what he was.

Toveine beamed back at him, and Gabrelle had to stop herself from shaking her head in wonderment, not for the first time. Pulling her hood a little forward as though against the cold, so it sheltered her face while giving her an edge to peek around, she studied the Red sister surreptitiously.

Everything she knew of the other woman said she buried her hates in shallow graves, if at all, and Toveine loathed men who could channel as deeply as any Red Gabrelle had ever met. *Any* Red must despise Logain Ablar, after the

claims he had made, that the Red Ajah itself had set him up to become a false Dragon. He might be holding his silence now, but the damage was done. There were sisters captive with them who looked at Reds as though thinking they, at least, were caught in a trap of their making. Yet Toveine all but *simpered* at him.

Gabrelle bit her underlip in perplexed thought. True, Desandre and Lemai had ordered everyone to achieve cordial relations with the Asha'man who held their bonds—the men must be lulled before the sisters could do anything useful—but Toveine bristled openly at every command from either sister. She had detested yielding to them, and might have refused if Lemai were not also Red, no matter that she had admitted it must be so. Or that no one had recognized her authority once she led them into captivity. She hated that, too. Yet that was when she had begun smiling at Logain.

For that matter, how could Logain sit at the other end of her bond and take that smile as anything but fraud? Gabrelle had picked at that knot before, too, without coming close to untying it. He knew too much about Toveine. Knowing her Ajah should have been enough. Yet Gabrelle felt a little suspicion in him when he looked at the Red sister as when he looked at her. He was hardly *free* of suspicion; the man was distrustful of everyone, it seemed. But less of *any* sister than of some Asha'man. That made no sense, either.

He's no fool, she reminded herself. So, why? And why for Toveine, as well? What is she scheming at?

Abruptly, Toveine flashed that seemingly warm smile at her, and spoke as if she had voiced at least one of her questions aloud. "With you near," she murmured in a mist of breath, "he's barely aware of me. You've made him *your* captive, sister."

Caught by surprise, Gabrelle flushed in spite of herself. Toveine never made conversation, and to say she disapproved of Gabrelle's situation with Logain was to understate drastically. Seducing him had seemed such an obvious way to get close enough to learn his plans, his weaknesses. After all, even if he *was* an Asháman, she had been Aes Sedai long before he was born, and she was hardly a total innocent when it came to men. He had been so surprised when he realized what she was doing that she almost thought of *him* as the innocent. More fool, she. Playing the Domani turned out to hide many surprises, and a few pitfalls. Worst of all, a trap she could never reveal to anyone. Something she very much feared that Toveine knew, though, at least in part. But then, any sister who had followed her lead must know, too, and she thought several had. None had spoken of the problem, and none was likely to, of course. Logain could mask the bond, in a crude way she believed would still allow her to find him however well it hid his emotions, but sometimes when they shared a pillow, he let the masking slip. To say the least, the results were . . . devastating. There was no calm restraint, then, no cool study. Not much of reason at all.

Hurriedly she summoned the image of the snowy land-

scape again and fixed it in her mind. Trees and boulders and smooth, white snow. Smooth, *cold* snow.

Logain did not look back at her, or give any outward sign, but the bond told her that he was aware of her momentary loss of control. The man brimmed with smugness! And *satisfaction!* It was all she could do not to seethe. But he would expect her to seethe, burn him! He *had* to know what she felt from him. Letting her anger rise, though, only filled the fellow with *amusement!* And he was not even attempting to hide it!

Toveine was wearing a small, satisfied smile, Gabrelle noticed, but she had only a moment to wonder why.

They had the morning to themselves, but now another rider appeared through the trees, a cloakless man in black who angled his horse in their direction when he saw them, and dug his bootheels into his animal's flanks for speed despite the snow. Logain reined in to wait, the image of calm, and Gabrelle stiffened as she halted her mount beside him. The feelings carried by the bond had shifted. Now they were the tension of a wolf waiting to spring. She expected to see his gauntleted hands on his swordhilt rather than resting at ease on the tall pommel of his saddle.

The newcomer was almost as tall as Logain, with waves of golden hair to his wide shoulders and a winning smile. She suspected he knew it was a winning smile. He was too pretty not to know, much more beautiful than Logain. Life's forges had hardened Logain's face, and left edges. This young man was smooth, yet. Still, the Sword and the

Dragon decorated his coat collar. He studied the two sisters with bright blue eyes. "Are you bedding both of them, Logain?" he said in a deep voice. "The plump one looks cold-eyed, to me, but the other appears warm enough."

Toveine hissed angrily, and Gabrelle's jaw clenched. She had made no real secret of what she did—she was no Cairhienin, to cloak in privacy what she was ashamed of in public—but that did not mean she expected to have it bantered about. Worse, the man spoke as though they were tavern lightskirts!

"Don't ever let me hear that again, Mishraile," Logain said quietly, and she realized the bond had changed again. It was cold, now; cold to make the snow seem warm. Cold to make a grave seem warm. She had heard that name before, Atal Mishraile, and felt distrust in Logain when he spoke it—certainly more than he felt for her or Toveine—but this was the feel of killing. It was almost laughable. The man held her prisoner, yet he was ready to do violence to defend her reputation? Part of her did want to laugh, but she tucked the information away. Any scrap might be useful.

The younger fellow gave no sign of hearing a threat. His smile never faltered. "The M'Hael says you can go, if you want. Can't see why you'd want to take on recruiting."

"Someone has to," Logain replied in a level tone.

Gabrelle exchanged puzzled glances with Toveine. Why *would* Logain want to go recruiting? They had seen parties of Asha'man return from that, and they were always tired from Traveling long distances, and usually dirty and snap-

pish besides. Men beating the drum for the Dragon Reborn did not always get the warmest welcome, it seemed, even before anyone learned what they were really after. And why were she and Toveine just hearing of it? She would have *sworn* he told her everything when they were lying together.

Mishraile shrugged. "Plenty of Dedicated and Soldiers to do that sort of work. Of course, I suppose it bores you looking after training all the time. Teaching fools to sneak around in the woods and climb cliffs as if they couldn't channel a whisker. Even a flyspeck village might look better." His smile slid into a smirk, disdainful and not at all winning. "Maybe if you ask the M'Hael, he'll let you join his classes at the palace. You wouldn't be bored then."

Logain's face never changed, but Gabrelle felt one sharp bolt of fury through the bond. She had overheard tidbits about Mazrim Taim and his private classes, but all any of the sisters really knew was that Logain and his cronies did not trust Taim or any who attended his lessons, and Taim appeared not to trust Logain. Unfortunately, what the sisters could learn of the classes was limited; no one was bonded to a man of Taim's faction. Some thought the mistrust was because both men had claimed to be the Dragon Reborn, or even a sign of the madness that channeling brought to men. She had not detected any evidence of insanity in Logain, and she watched for it as hard as she watched for signs he was about to channel. If she were still bound to him when he went mad, it might seize her mind, too. Whatever caused a crack in the Asha'man's ranks must be exploited, though.

Mishraile's smile faded as Logain merely looked at him. "Enjoy your flyspecks," he said finally, pulling his horse around. A thud of his heel made the animal spring away as he called over his shoulder, "Glory waits for some of us, Logain."

"He may not enjoy his Dragon long," Logain murmured, watching the other man gallop off. "He's too free with his tongue." She did not think he meant the comment about her and Toveine, but she could not fathom what else he could mean. And why was he suddenly worried? Hiding it very well, especially considering the bond, but still, he was worried. Light, sometimes it seemed that knowing what was in a man's head made the confusion worse!

Abruptly, he turned his gaze on her and Toveine, studying. A new thread of concern slipped through the bond. About them? Or—an odd thought—*for* them?

"I fear we must cut short our ride," he said after a moment. "I have preparations to make."

He did not break into a gallop, but he still set a quicker pace back toward the village of the men in training than he had coming out. He was concentrating on something, now; thinking hard, Gabrelle suspected. The bond practically hummed with it. He must have been riding by instinct.

Before they had gone very far, Toveine moved her horse close to Gabrelle's. Leaning in her saddle, she tried to fix Gabrelle with an intent stare while darting quick glances at Logain as if afraid he might look back and see them talking. She never seemed to pay attention to what the bond

told her. The divided effort made her bob about like a puppet, in danger of falling.

"We must go with him," the Red whispered. "Whatever it takes, you must see to it." Gabrelle raised her eyebrows, and Toveine had the grace to color, but she lost nothing of her insistence. "We cannot afford to be left behind," she breathed hurriedly. "The man didn't abandon his ambitions when he came here. Whatever vileness he plans, we can do nothing if we aren't right there when he tries."

"I can see what's in front of my nose," Gabrelle said sharply, and felt relief when Toveine simply nodded and fell silent. It was all Gabrelle could do to control the fear that was rising in her. Did Toveine never *think* about what she must sense through the bond? Something that had always been there in the connection with Logain—determination—now lay hard and sharp as a knife. She thought she knew what it meant, this time, and knowing made her mouth dry. Against whom, she could not say, but she was sure that Logain Ablar was riding to war.

Slowly descending one of the wide hallways that spiraled gently through the White Tower, Yukiri felt prickly as a starved cat. She could barely make herself listen to what the sister gliding beside her was saying. The morning was still dim, first light darkened by the snow falling heavily on Tar Valon, and the middle levels of the Tower were as icy as a Borderland winter. Well, perhaps not so cold as that, she allowed after a moment. She had not been that far north in

a number of years, and memory expanded what it did not shrink. That was the reason written records were so important. Except when you did not dare write down anything, at least. Still, it was chill enough. For all the ancient builders' cleverness and skill, heat from the great furnaces in the basement never reached this high. Drafts made the flames dance on the gilded standlamps, and some were strong enough to stir the heavy tapestries spaced along the white walls, spring flowers and woodlands and exotic animals and birds alternating with scenes of Tower triumphs that would never be displayed in the public areas below. Her own rooms, with their warm fireplaces, would once have been much more comfortable.

News from the outside world churned through her head despite her efforts to avoid it. Or rather, more often, the lack of solid news. What eyes-and-ears reported from Altara and Arad Doman was all confusion, and the few reports beginning to seep out of Tarabon again were frightening. Rumor put the Borderland rulers everywhere from the Blight to Andor to Amadicia to the Aiel Waste; the only confirmed fact was that none were where they were supposed to be, guarding the Blightborder. The Aiel were everywhere, and finally out of al'Thor's control, it appeared, if they had ever been in it. The latest news from Murandy made her want to grind her teeth and weep at the same time, while Cairhien . . . ! Sisters all over the Sun Palace, some suspected of being rebels and none known to be loyal, and still no word of Coiren and her embassy since they departed the

city, though they should have been back in Tar Valon long since. And as if that were not enough, al'Thor himself had vanished like a soap bubble yet again. Could the tales that he had half-destroyed the Sun Palace be true? Light, the man *could* not go mad yet! Or had Elaida's witless offer of "protection" frightened him into hiding? Did *anything* frighten him? He frightened her. He frightened the rest of the Hall, too, let them put whatever face on it they wanted.

The only thing truly certain was that none of that mattered a spit in a rainstorm. Knowing so did not help her mood in the slightest. Worry over being caught in a tangle of roses, even if the thorns might kill you eventually, was a luxury when you had a knife point pressed to your ribs.

"Every time she's left the Tower in the last ten years, it has been on her own affairs, so there are no recent records to check," her companion murmured. "It's difficult to learn exactly when she *has* been out of the Tower and remain . . . discreet." Her dark golden hair held back by ivory combs, Meidani was tall, and slender enough to look over-balanced by her bosom, an effect emphasized by both the fit of her dark silver embroidered bodice and the way she walked in a stoop to put her mouth more on the level of Yukiri's ear. Her shawl was caught on her wrists, the long gray fringe dragging on the floortiles.

"Straighten your backbone," Yukiri growled quietly. "My ears aren't clogged with dirt."

The other woman jerked herself upright, faint splashes of color in her cheeks. Pulling her shawl higher on her arms,

Meidani half glanced over her shoulder toward her Warder Leonin, who was following at a discreet distance. If they could barely hear the faint tinkle of the silver bells in the lean man's black braids, though, he could hear nothing said in a moderate tone. The man knew no more than necessary—precious little, in fact, except that his Aes Sedai wanted certain things of him; that was enough for any good Warder—and he might cause problems if he learned too much, but there was no need for whispering. People who saw whispering wanted to know what the secret was.

The other Gray was no more the source of her irritation than the outside world, however, even if the woman was a jackdaw in swan's feathers. Not the main source, anyway. A disgusting thing, a rebel pretending loyalty, yet Yukiri was actually glad that Saerin and Pevara had convinced her that they should not yet turn Meidani and her sister jackdaws over to Tower Law. Their wings were clipped, now, and they were useful. They might even gain a measure of clemency, for when they did face justice. Of course, when the oath that had clipped Meidani's wings came out, Yukiri might easily find herself wishing for clemency. Rebels or not, what she and the others had done with Meidani and her confederates was as far outside the law as murder. Or treason. An oath of personal obedience—sworn on the Oath Rod itself; sworn under duress—was all too close to Compulsion, which was clearly prohibited if not really defined. Still, sometimes you had to smudge the plaster to smoke out hornets, and the Black Ajah were hornets with

venomous stings. The law would have its course in due time—without the law, there was nothing—but she needed to be more concerned with whether she would survive the smoking out than with what penalties the law would exact. Corpses had no need to worry about punishment.

She motioned curtly for Meidani to go on, but no sooner had the other woman opened her mouth than three Browns rounded a corner from another hallway right in front of them, flaunting their shawls like Greens. Yukiri knew Maris Thornhill and Doraise Mesianos slightly, in the manner Sitters knew sisters from other Ajahs who spent long periods in the Tower, which was to say enough to attach names to faces and not much more. Mild and absorbed in their studies was how she would have described them, if pressed. Elin Warrel was so newly raised to the shawl, she still should have been bobbing curtsies on instinct. Instead of offering courtesies to a Sitter, though, all three stared at Yukiri and Meidani the way cats stared at strange dogs. Or maybe dogs at strange cats. No mildness, there.

“May I ask about a point of Arafellin law, Sitter?” Meidani said, as smoothly as if that was what she had been intending to say all along.

Yukiri nodded, and Meidani began rambling about fishing rights on rivers versus lakes, hardly an inspired choice. A magistrate might ask an Aes Sedai to listen to a case of fishing rights, but only to bolster her own opinion if powerful people were involved and she was worried about an appeal to the throne.

GLIMMERS: The Prologue to CROSSROADS OF TWILIGHT

A single Warder trailed the Browns—Yukiri could not recall whether he belonged to Marris or Doraise—a heavy-set fellow with a hard round face and a dark top-knot who eyed Leonin and the swords on his back with a distrust surely picked up from his sister. That pair stalked by up the slowly spiraling corridor with plump chins high, the skinny newling leaping anxiously to keep up. The Warder strode after them radiating the air of a man in hostile country.

Hostility was all too usual, nowadays. The invisible walls between the Ajahs, once barely thick enough to hide each Ajah's own mysteries, had become hard stone ramparts with moats. No, not moats; chasms, deep and wide. Sisters never left their own Ajah's quarters alone, often took their Warders even to the library and the dining rooms, and always wore their shawls, as though someone might mistake their Ajah, otherwise. Yukiri herself was wearing her best, embroidered in silver and thread-of-gold, with the long silk fringe that hung to her ankles. So she supposed she was flaunting her Ajah a bit, too. And lately, she had been considering that a dozen years was long enough to go without a Warder. A horrible thought, once she sifted out the source. No sister should have need of a Warder inside the White Tower.

Not for the first time, the thought hit her hard that someone had to mediate among the Ajahs, and soon, or the rebels would dance in through the front door, bold as thieves, and empty the house while the rest of them squabbled over who got Great-Aunt Sumi's pewter. But the only

end of the thread she could see to begin working out the snarl was to have Meidani and her friends publicly admit that they had been sent to the Tower by the rebels to spread rumors—tales they still insisted were true!—that the Red Ajah had created Logain as a false Dragon. *Could* it be true? Without Pevara knowing? Impossible to think that a Sitter, especially Pevara, could have been fooled. In any case, that bit of the tangle had been overlaid with so many others by now that it scarcely could make any difference by itself. Besides, it would throw away the aid of ten out of the fourteen women she could be sure were not Black Ajah, not to mention likely exposing what the rest of them were doing, before the storm over it blew out.

She shivered, and it had nothing to do with drafts in the corridor. She and every other woman who might reveal the truth would die before that storm ended, by so-called accident or in bed. Or she might just vanish, apparently gone out of the Tower never to be seen again. She had no doubt of that. Any evidence would be buried so deep, an army with shovels could never dig it up. Even rumors would be plastered over. It had happened before. The world and most sisters still believed Tamra Oспенya had died in her bed. She had believed it. They had to have the Black Ajah wrapped up and tied, as near as possible, before they dared risk going public.

Meidani took up her report again once the Browns were safely past, but fell silent only moments later when, just ahead of them, a big hairy hand suddenly thrust aside a tap-

etry from behind. An icy draft swept out of the doorway that had been hidden by the tapestry's brightly colored birds from the Drowned Lands, and a heavy fellow in a thick brown workcoat backed into the corridor, pulling a hand-cart stacked high with split hickory that another serving man in a rough coat was pushing from behind. Common laborers; neither had the white Flame on his chest.

At sight of two Aes Sedai, the men hastily let the tapestry fall back into place and wrestled their cart out of the way against the wall while trying to make their bows, almost toppling the load, which set them grabbing at the sliding firewood frantically. No doubt they had expected to finish their work without encountering any sisters. Yukiri always felt sympathy for the people who had to haul wood and water and everything else up the servants' ramps all the way from the ground, but she strode past them with a scowl.

Talk while walking was never overheard, and the hallways in the common areas had seemed a good place to be private with Meidani. Much better than her own apartments, where any ward against eavesdropping would only announce to everyone in the Gray quarter that she was discussing secrets, and far worse, with whom. There were only two hundred or so sisters in the Tower at the moment, a number the White Tower could swallow and seem vacant, and with everyone keeping to themselves, the common areas should have been empty. So she had thought.

She had taken into account the liveried servants rushing

about to check lampwicks and oil levels and a dozen other things, and the plain-clad workers carrying wicker baskets of the Light knew what on their backs. They were always about in the early hours, readying the Tower for the day, but they made hasty bows and curtsies and scurried to get out of a sister's way. Out of hearing, Tower servants knew how to be tactful, especially since anyone eavesdropping on a sister would be shown the door. Given the present mood in the Tower, the servants were particularly quick to avoid so much as a chance of overhearing things they should not.

What she had failed to reckon on was how many sisters would choose to walk outside the quarters, by twos and threes, despite the hour and the cold, Reds trying to stare down anyone they encountered except other Reds, Greens and Yellows competing for the crown of haughty and Browns doing their best to outdo both. A few Whites, all but one Warderless, attempted to maintain a facade of cool reason while jumping at their own footfalls. One little group was not out of sight for more than minutes, it seemed, before another appeared, so Meidani spent nearly as much time chattering about points of law as she did giving her report.

Worst of all, twice Grays smiled in what looked like relief on seeing others of their Ajah, and would have joined them had Yukiri not shaken her head. Which infuriated her no end because it let all who saw know she had special reason to be alone with Meidani. Even if the Black Ajah took no notice, and the Light send there was no reason they should,

too many sisters spied on other Ajahs these days, and in spite of the Three Oaths, the tales they carried somehow grew in the carrying. With Elaida apparently trying to force the Ajahs into line by brute force, those tales too often resulted in penances, and the best to be hoped for was that you could pretend to have chosen to take it on for reasons of your own. Yukiri had already suffered through one such, and she had no desire to waste days scrubbing floors again, especially now that she had more on her plate than she knew what to do with. And taking the alternative, a private visit to Silviana, was no better, even if it did save time! Elaida seemed fiercer than ever since she summoned Silviana for her own supposedly private penance. The whole Tower was still buzzing with that.

As much as Yukiri hated admitting it, all that made her careful how she looked at the other sisters she saw. Look too long, and you might seem to be spying yourself. Shift your gaze away too fast, and you looked furtive, with the same result. Even so, she could barely keep her eyes from lingering on one pair of Yellows who glided along a crossing corridor like queens in their own palace.

The dark stocky Warder following just far enough behind to give them privacy must have belonged to Pritalle Nerbaijan, a green-eyed woman who had largely escaped the Saldaean nose, because Atuan Larisett had no Warder. Yukiri knew little about Pritalle, but she would learn more after seeing her in close conversation with Atuan. In high-necked gray slashed with yellow and a silk-fringed shawl,

the Taraboner was striking. Her dark hair, in thin, brightly beaded braids that hung to her waist, framed a face that somehow seemed perfect as it was without being beautiful. She was even fairly modest, at least as Yellows went. But she was the woman Meidani and the others were trying to study without being caught out. The woman whose name they were afraid to speak aloud except behind strong wards. Atuan Larisett was one of only three Black sisters Talene knew. That was how they organized themselves, three women who knew each other, with each knowing one more the other two did not. Atuan had been Talene's "one more," so there was some hope she could be followed to two others.

Just before the pair passed out of view beyond the corner, Atuan glanced up the spiral hallway. Her gaze only brushed by Yukiri, yet that was enough to make Yukiri's heart leap into her throat. She kept walking, holding her face calm with an effort, and risked a quick glance of her own when she reached the corner. Atuan and Pritalle were already well along the corridor, heading toward the outer ring. The Warder was in the way, but neither was looking back. Pritalle was shaking her head. To something Atuan was saying? They were too far for Yukiri to hear any sound other than the faint click of the dark Warder's bootheels on the floor-tiles. It had just been a glance. Of course, it had. She quickened her step to take her beyond sight if one of them did look over a shoulder, and let out a long breath she had not realized she was holding. Meidani echoed her faintly, her shoulders sagging.

Strange, how it takes us, Yukiri thought, squaring her own shoulders.

When they first learned Talene was a Darkfriend, Talene had been a shielded prisoner. *And she still scared us spitless*, she admitted to herself. Well, what they did to make her confess had scared them spitless first, but learning the truth turned their tongues to dust. Now Talene was tethered tighter than Meidani, closely guarded even if she did appear to walk free—how to keep a Sitter prisoner without anyone noticing had been beyond even Saerin—and she was pathetically eager to offer up every scrap she knew or even suspected in hope it might save her life, not that she had any choice. Hardly an object of fear. As for the rest . . .

Pevara had tried to maintain that Talene must be wrong about Galina Casban, and went into a rage that lasted a full day when she finally was convinced that her Red sister was really Black. She still spoke of strangling Galina with her own hands. Yukiri herself had felt a cold detachment when Temaile Kinderode was named. If there were Darkfriends in the Tower, it stood to reason some had to be Grays, though perhaps disliking Temaile helped. She remained cool even after she did the sums and realized that Temaile had left the Tower at the same time that three sisters were murdered. That provided more names for suspicion, other sisters who had gone then, too, but Galina and Temaile and the rest were out of the Tower, beyond reach for the moment, and only the two could be proven Darkfriends.

Atuan was right there, Black Ajah without doubt, walking

the Tower as she wished, unrestrained and unbound of the Three Oaths. And until Doesine could arrange for her to be questioned in secret—a difficult matter, even for a Sitter of Atuan's Ajah, since it had to be secret from *everyone*—until then, all they could do was watch. A distant, carefully circumspect watching. It was like living with a red adder, never knowing when you would find yourself *eye-to-eye* with it, never knowing when it might bite. Like living in a den of red adders, and only being able to see one.

Suddenly, Yukiri realized that the wide, curving corridor was empty ahead as far as she could see, and a glance back showed only Leonin behind. The Tower might have been empty save of the three of them. Nothing in sight moved except the flickering flames on the standlamps. Silence.

Meidani gave a small start. "Forgive me, Sitter. Seeing her so suddenly took me aback. Where was I? Oh, yes. I understand that Celestin and Annharid are trying to find out her close friends in the Yellow." Celestin and Annharid were Meidani's fellow conspirators, both Yellow. There were two from each Ajah—except the Red and the Blue, of course—which had proven very useful. "I fear that won't be much help. She has a wide circle of friends, or did before the . . . current situation rose between the Ajahs." A touch of satisfaction tinged her voice, however smooth her face; she was still a rebel, in spite of the added oath. "Investigating all of them will be difficult, if not impossible."

"Forget her for the moment." It took an effort for Yukiri not to crane her neck trying to look every way at once. A

tapestry worked with large white flowers rippled slightly, and she hesitated until she was sure it was a draft and not another servant coming out of a servant's ramp. She never could recollect where they were located. Her new topic was as dangerous as discussing Atuan, in its own way. "Last night, I remembered you were a novice with Elaida, and close friends as I recall. It would be a good idea for you to renew that friendship."

"That was some years ago," the taller woman replied stiffly, lifting her shawl to her shoulders and wrapping it around herself as though she suddenly felt the cold. "Elaida very properly broke it off when she was raised Accepted. She might have been accused of favoritism if I were in a class she was given to teach."

"As well for you that you weren't a favorite," Yukiri said drily. Elaida's current ferocity had its precedent. Before she went off to Andor years ago, she had pushed those she favored so hard that sisters had needed to step in more than once. Sivan Sanche had been one of them, strange to remember, though Sivan had never needed rescuing from standards she could not meet. Strange and sad. "Even so, you *will* do everything in your power to renew that friendship."

Meidani walked two dozen paces along the corridor opening and closing her mouth, adjusting and readjusting her shawl, twitching her shoulders as though trying to shrug off a horsefly, looking everywhere but at Yukiri. How had the woman ever functioned as a Gray, with so little self-

control?" I did try," she said finally, in a breathy tone. She still avoided Yukiri's eye. "Several times. The Keeper . . . Alviarin always put me off. The Amyrlin was busy, she had appointments, she needed rest. There was always some excuse. I think Elaida just doesn't want to take up a friendship she dropped more than thirty years ago."

So the rebels had remembered that friendship, too. How had they thought to use it? Spying, most likely. She would have to find out how Meidani was supposed to pass on what she learned. In any case, the rebels had provided the tool, and Yukiri would use it. "Alviarin is out of your way. She left the Tower yesterday, or maybe the day before. No one is quite certain. But the maids say she took spare clothes, so it's unlikely she'll return for a few days at the soonest."

"Where could she have gone in this weather?" Meidani frowned. "It's been snowing since yesterday morning, and it was threatening before."

Yukiri stopped and used both hands to turn the other woman to face her. "The only thing that need concern you, Meidani, is that she's gone," she said firmly. Where *had* Alviarin gone in this? "You have a clear path to Elaida, and you will take it. And you will keep a close watch to see if anyone might be reading Elaida's papers. Just be sure no one sees you watching." Talene said the Black Ajah knew everything that came out of the Amyrlin's study before it was announced, and they needed someone close to Elaida if they were to find out how it was done. Of course, Alviarin saw everything before Elaida signed, and the woman had taken

on more authority than any Keeper in memory, but that was no reason to accuse her of being a Darkfriend. No reason not to, either. Her past was being investigated, too. "Watch Alviarín, as well, as much as you can, but Elaida's papers are the important thing."

Meidani sighed and gave a reluctant nod. She might have to obey, but she knew the added danger she would be in if Alviarín did turn out a Darkfriend. Yet Elaida herself still might be Black, whatever Saerin and Pevara insisted. A Darkfriend as Amyrlin Seat. Now that was a thought to pickle your heart.

"Yukiri!" a woman's voice called from back up the hallway.

A Sitter in the Hall of the Tower did *not* jump like a startled goat at hearing her own name, but Yukiri did. If she had not been holding onto Meidani, she might have fallen, and as it was, the pair of them staggered like drunken farmers at a harvest dance.

Recovering, Yukiri jerked her shawl straight and set her face in a scowl that did not diminish when she saw who was hurrying toward her. Seaine was supposed to be keeping close to her own rooms, with as many White sisters around her as she could manage, when she was not with Yukiri or one of the other Sitters who knew about Talene and the Black Ajah, but here she was scurrying down the hallway with only Bernaile Gelbarn, a stocky Taraboner and another of Meidani's jackdaws, for company. Leonin stepped aside, and gave Seaine a formal bow, fingertips pressed to his heart. Meidani and Bernaile were foolish enough to exchange

smiles. They were friends, but they should know better, when they could not tell who might see.

Yukiri was in no mood for smiles. "Taking the air, Seaine?" she said sharply. "Saerin won't be pleased, when I tell her. Not at *all* pleased. *I'm* not pleased, Seaine."

Meidani made a small sound in her throat, and Bernaile's head twitched, her multitude of narrow beaded braids rattling against one another. The pair of them took to studying a tapestry that supposedly showed the humbling of Queen Rhiannon, and for all their smooth faces, clearly they wished they were somewhere else. In their eyes, Sitters were supposed to be equals. And so they were. Normally. After a fashion. Leonin should not have been able to hear a word, but he could feel Meidani's mood, of course, and he moved a step further away. While still keeping watch along the corridor, of course. A good man. A wise man.

Seaine had sense enough to look abashed. Unconsciously, she smoothed her dress, covered with snowy embroidery along the hem and across the bodice, but almost immediately her hands knotted in her shawl and her eyebrows drew down stubbornly. Seaine had been strong-willed from the day she first came to the Tower, a furniture-maker's daughter from Lugard who had talked her father into buying passage for her and her mother. Passage for two upriver, but only one down. Strong-willed and confident. And frequently as blind to the world around her as any Brown. Whites were often like that, all logic and no judgment.

"There's no need for me to hide from the Black Ajah, Yukiri," she said.

Yukiri winced. Fool woman, naming the Black right out in the open. The corridor was still empty in both directions as far as the curve allowed sight, but carelessness led to more carelessness. She could be stubborn herself, when there was need, but at least she showed more brain than a goose about when and where. She opened her mouth to give Seaine a piece of her mind, a sharp piece, but the other woman rushed on before she could speak.

"Saerin told me I could find you." Seaine's mouth tightened and spots of color flared in her cheeks, at having asked permission or at having to ask. It was understandable for her to resent her situation, of course. Just witless for her not to accept it. "I need to talk to you alone, Yukiri. About the second mystery."

For a moment, Yukiri was as puzzled as Meidani and Bernaile looked. They could sham not listening, but that did not shut their ears. Second mystery? What did Seaine mean? Unless . . . Could she mean the thing that had brought Yukiri into the hunt for the Black Ajah in the first place? Wondering why the heads of the Ajahs were meeting in secret had lost its urgency compared to finding Darkfriends among the sisters.

"Very well, Seaine," Yukiri said, more calmly than she felt. "Meidani, take Leonin down the hall until you can just see Seaine and me around the curve. Keep a sharp eye for anyone coming this way. Bernaile, do the same up the hall."

They were moving before she finished speaking, and as soon as they were out of earshot, she turned her attention to Seaine. "Well?"

To her surprise, the glow of *saidar* sprang up around the White Sitter, who wove a ward against eavesdropping around the pair of them. It was a clear sign of secrets to anyone who saw. This had better be important.

"Think about it logically," Seaine's voice was calm, but her hands still gripped her shawl in fists. She stood very straight, towering over Yukiri, though she was not much above average height herself. "It's more than a month, almost two, since Elaida came to me, and nearly two weeks since you found Pevara and me. If the Black Ajah knew about me, I would be dead by now. Pevara and I would have been dead before you and Doesine and Saerin ever walked in on us. Therefore, they don't know. About any of us. I admit I was frightened, at first, but I have control of myself, now. There's no reason for the rest of you to keep trying to treat me like a novice," a little heat invaded the calmness, "and a brainless one, at that."

"You'll have to talk to Saerin," Yukiri said curtly. Saerin had taken charge from the start—after forty years in the Hall for the Brown, Saerin was very good at taking charge—and Yukiri had no intention of going against her unless she must, not without the Sitter's privilege she could hardly claim in the circumstances. As well try to catch a falling boulder. If Saerin could be convinced, Pevara and Doesine would come around, and she herself would hardly

try to stand in the way. "Now, what about this 'second secret'? You *do* mean the Ajah heads meeting?"

Seaine's face took on a muley expression. Yukiri almost expected her ears to lie back. Then she exhaled. "Did the head of your Ajah have a hand in choosing Andaya for the Hall? More than usual, I mean?"

"She did," Yukiri replied carefully. Everyone had been sure Andaya would go into the Hall one day, perhaps in another forty or fifty years, yet Serancha had all but anointed her, when the customary method was discussion until a consensus could be reached on two or three candidates, then a secret ballot. That was Ajah business, though, as secret as Serancha's name and title.

"I knew it." Seaine nodded excitedly, not at all her normal manner. "Saerin says that Juilaine was hand-picked for the Brown, too, apparently not their usual way, and Doesine says the same about Suana, though she was hesitant about saying anything. I think Suana may be the head of the Yellow herself. In any case, she was a Sitter for forty years the first time, and you know it isn't common to take a chair after you were a Sitter that long. And Ferane stepped down for the White less than ten years ago; no one has ever entered the Hall again so soon. To cap it off, Talene says the Greens nominate choices and their Captain-General chooses one, but Adelorna chose Rina without any nominations."

Yukiri managed to stifle a grimace, but only by a hair. Everyone had their suspicions about who headed other Ajahs, else no one would ever have noticed the meetings in

the first place, yet speaking those names aloud was rude at best. Anyone but a Sitter might face penance for it. Of course, she and Seaine both knew when it came to Adelorna. In her attempts to curry favor, Talene poured out all the secrets of the Green without being asked. It embarrassed all of them, except Talene herself. At least it explained why the Greens had been in such an outstanding rage when Adelorna was birched. Still, Captain-General was a ridiculous title, Battle Ajah or no Battle Ajah. At least Head Clerk really described what Serancha did, in a manner of speaking.

Down the corridor, Meidani and her Warder were standing just in sight on the curve, apparently talking quietly. One or the other always watched further down around the curve, though. In the opposite direction, Bernaile was just in sight, too. Her head was swiveling constantly as she tried to watch Yukiri and Seaine while keeping an eye out for anyone approaching. The way she kept shifting from one foot to the other would attract attention, too, but these days a sister alone outside her Ajah quarter was asking for trouble, and she knew it. This conversation had to end soon.

Yukiri raised one finger. "Five Ajahs had to choose new Sitters after women they had in the Hall joined the rebels." Seaine nodded, and Yukiri raised a second finger. "Each of those Ajahs chose a woman as Sitter who wasn't the . . . logical . . . choice." Seaine nodded again. A third finger joined the first two. "The Brown had to choose two new Sitters, but

you didn't mention Shevan. Is there anything . . ." Yukiri smiled wryly, "odd . . . about her?"

"No; according to Saerin, Shevan would likely have been her replacement when she decided to step down, but—"

"Seaine, if you're actually implying the Ajah heads *conspired* over who would go into the Hall—and I never heard a more cracked-brained notion!—if that's what you're suggesting, why would they choose five odd women and one who isn't?"

"Yes, I am suggesting it. With the rest of you keeping me practically under lock and key, I've had more time for thinking than I know what to do with. Julaine and Rina and Andaya gave me a hint, and Ferane made me decide to check." What did Seaine mean about Andaya and the other two giving a hint? Oh. Of course; Rina and Andaya were not really old enough to be in the Hall yet, either. The custom of not talking about age soon enough became the habit of not thinking about it, either.

"Two might have been coincidence," Seaine went on, "even three, though that strains credulity, but five makes a pattern. Except for the Blue, the Brown was the only Ajah to have two Sitters join the rebels. Maybe there's a reason in that why they chose one odd sister and one not, if I can figure it out. But there is a pattern, Yukiri—a puzzle—and whether it's rational or not, something tells me we had better solve it before the rebels get here. It makes me feel as though somebody's hand is on my shoulder, but when I look, there isn't anyone there."

What strained credulity was the idea of the Ajah heads conspiring in the first place. *But then*, Yukiri thought, *a conspiracy of Sitters is beyond far-fetched, and I'm in the middle of one.* And there was the simple fact that no one outside an Ajah was supposed to know the Ajah's head, but the other Ajah heads against all custom did. "If there's a puzzle," she said wearily, "you have a long time to solve it. The rebels can't leave Murandy before spring, whatever they've told people, and the march upriver will take months, if they hold their army together that long." She did not doubt they would, though, not any longer. "Go back to your rooms before someone sees us standing here warded, and think on your puzzle," she said, not unkindly, resting a hand on Seaine's sleeve. "You'll have to put up with being looked after until we're *all* sure you are safe."

The expression on Seaine's face would have been called sullen on anyone but a Sitter. "I'll speak to Saerin again," she said, but the light of *saidar* around her vanished.

Watching her join Bernaile and the two of them glide up the curving hallway toward the Ajah quarters, both as wary as fawns when wolves were out, Yukiri felt a heavy heart. It was a pity the rebels could not get there before summer. At least that might make the Ajahs come together again, so sisters were not forced to slink about the White Tower. *As well wish for wings*, she thought sadly.

Determined to keep her mood in check, she went to gather up Meidani and Leonin. She had a Black sister to

investigate, and at least investigation was a puzzle she knew how to work.

Gawyn's eyes popped open in the darkness as a new wave of cold rose into the hayloft. The barn's thick stone walls normally kept out the worst of the night's chill, if only the worst. Voices murmured below; no one sounded excited. He took his hand away from the sword lying beside him and tugged his gauntlets tighter. Like all the rest of the Younglings, he slept in every stitch he could put on. Probably it was just time to wake some of the men around him for their sentry turns, but he was fully awake now himself, and he doubted he would find sleep again soon. In any case, his sleep was always fretful, troubled by dark dreams, haunted by the woman he loved. He did not know where Egwene was, or whether she was alive. Or whether she could forgive him. He stood up, letting the loose hay he had pulled over himself slide off his cloak, and buckled on his swordbelt.

As he picked his way among the shadowy mounds of men sleeping atop the stacked bales of hay, the faint scrape of boots on wooden rungs told him someone was climbing the ladder to the loft. A dim figure appeared at the top of the ladder, then stopped to wait for him.

"Lord Gawyn?" Rajar's deep voice said softly, in a Domani accent unaltered by six years training in Tar Valon. The First Lieutenant's rumbling voice was always a surprise, coming from a slight man who stood barely higher than Gawyn's shoulder. Even so, had times been different, Rajar

surely would have been a Warder by this time. "I thought I'd have to wake you. A sister just arrived, on foot. A messenger from the Tower. She wanted the sister in charge here. I told Tomil and his brother to take her to the Mayor's house before they turned in for the night."

Gawyn sighed. He should have gone home when he returned to Tar Valon and found the Younglings expelled from the city, instead of letting himself be caught here by winter. Especially when he was sure Elaida wanted them all dead. His sister Elayne would come to Caemlyn, eventually, if she was not already there. Certainly any Aes Sedai would see that the Daughter-Heir of Andor reached Caemlyn in time to claim the throne before someone else could. The White Tower would not give up the advantage of a queen who would also be Aes Sedai. On the other hand, Elayne could be on her way to Tar Valon, too, or residing in the White Tower right that minute. He did not how she had become entangled with Sivan Sanche, or how deeply—she always dove into a pond without checking the depth—but Elaida and the Hall of the Tower might want to question her closely, Daughter-Heir or not. Queen or not. He was sure she could not be held accountable, though. She was still only one of the Accepted. He had to tell himself that frequently.

The newest problem was that an army lay between him and Tar Valon, now. At least twenty-five thousand soldiers on this side of the River Erinin and, he had to believe, as many on the west bank. They had to be supporting the

Aes Sedai who Elaida called rebels. Who else would dare besiege Tar Valon itself? The way that army had appeared, though, seeming to materialize out of nowhere in the middle of a snowstorm, was enough to raise prickles on his back still. Rumor and alarms always flew ahead of any large force under arms on the march. Always. This one had arrived like spirits, in silence. The army was as real as stone, however, so he could neither enter Tar Valon to find whether Elayne was in the Tower, nor ride south. Any army would take notice of upwards of three hundred men on the move, and the rebels would have no good will toward the Younglings. Even if he went alone, travel in winter was very slow, and he could reach Caemlyn as quickly if he waited until spring. There was no hope of finding passage on a ship, either. The siege would mire river traffic in a hopeless snarl. He was mired in a hopeless snarl.

And now, an Aes Sedai had come in the middle of the night. She would not simplify matters any.

"Let's find out what news she brought," he said quietly, motioning Rajar down the ladder ahead of him.

Twenty horses and their stacked saddles crowded nearly every inch of the dark barn not taken by Mistress Millin's two dozen or so milkcows in their stalls, so he and Rajar had to thread their way to the wide doors. The only warmth came from the sleeping animals. The two men guarding the horses were silent shadows, but Gawyn could feel them watching Rajar and him slip out into the icy night. They would know about the messenger, and be wondering.

The sky was clear, and the waning moon still gave a fair light. The village of Dorlan shone with snow. Holding their cloaks close, the pair of them trudged knee-deep through the village in silence, along what had once been the road to Tar Valon from a city that had not existed for hundreds of years. Nowadays, nobody traveled in this direction from Tar Valon except to come to Dorlan, and there was no reason to come in winter. By tradition, the village supplied cheeses to the White Tower and to no one else. It was a tiny place, just fifteen slate-roofed, gray stone houses with drifts of snow piled up as high as the bottoms of the first-floor windows. A little distance behind each house stood its cowbarn, all crowded with men and horses now, as well as cows. Most of Tar Valon might well have forgotten Dorlan existed. Who thought about where cheese came from? It had seemed a very good place for keeping out of sight. Until now.

All the houses but one in the village were dark. Light leaked through the shutters on several windows of Master Burlow's dwelling, upstairs and down. Garon Burlow had the misfortune to own the largest house in Dorlan, in addition to being Mayor. Any villager who had shifted sleeping arrangements to find a bed for an Aes Sedai must be regretting it by now; and Master Burlow had had two rooms already empty.

Stamping the snow from his boots on the stone step, Gawyn rapped at the Mayor's stout door with a gauntleted fist. No one answered, and after a moment he lifted the latch and led Rajar in.

The beam-ceilinged front room was fairly large for a farmhouse, and dominated by several tall open-front cabinets, full of pewter and glazed crockery, and a long, polished table lined with high-back chairs. All of the oil lamps had been lit, an extravagance in winter, when a few tallow candles would do, but the flames in the fireplace had made little impression on the split logs, yet, or on the temperature of the room. Even so, the two sisters who had rooms above were barefoot on the rugless wooden floor, with fur-lined cloaks flung hastily over their linen nightdresses. Katerine Alruddin and Tarna Feir were watching a small woman in a dark, yellow-slashed riding dress and cloak that were snow-damp to her hips. She stood as near the wide hearth as she would, tiredly warming her hands and shivering. Afoot in the snow, she could not have made the trip from Tar Valon in less than two or three days, and even Aes Sedai felt the cold eventually. She had to be the sister Rajar had spoken of, yet compared to the others, the agelessness was hardly noticeable in her. Compared to the other two, she was hardly noticeable at all.

The absence of the Mayor and his wife put an extra knot in Gawyn's middle, though he had half expected it. They would have been there making over the Aes Sedai, offering hot drinks and food, no matter the hour, unless they had been sent back to their beds to give Katerine and Tarna privacy with the messenger. Which likely meant he was a fool to want to know the message. But he had known that before he left the barn.

“... boatman said he would stay where we landed until the siege lifted,” the small woman was saying in weary tones as Gawyn entered, “but he was so frightened, he could be leagues downriver by now.” As the cold from the doorway reached her, she looked around, and some of the fatigue drained from her square face. “Gawyn Trakand,” she said. “I have orders for you from the Amyrlin Seat, Lord Gawyn.”

“Orders?” Gawyn said, drawing off his gauntlets and tucking them behind his belt to gain time. Blunt truth might be in order for once, he decided. “Why would Elaida send me orders? Why should I obey if she did? She disowned me, and the Younglings.” Rajar had taken a respectful stance for the sisters, hands folded behind his back, and he gave Gawyn a quick sidelong glance. He would not speak out of turn, whatever Gawyn said, but the Younglings did not share Gawyn’s belief. Aes Sedai did what they did, and no man could know why until a sister told him. The Younglings had cast their lots with the White Tower wholeheartedly, embracing fate.

“That can wait, Narenwin,” Katerine snapped, jerking her cloak tighter. Her black hair spilled around her shoulders half in tangles, as though she had taken a few hasty swipes with a comb and given up. There was an intensity about her that reminded Gawyn of a hunting lynx. Or maybe one wary of traps. She spared half a glance for him and Rajar; no more. “I have pressing business in the Tower. Tell me how to find this nameless fishing village. Whether or not your boatman is still there, I’ll find someone to take me across.”

"And me," Tarna put in, her strong jaw stubborn and her blue eyes sharp as spears. In contrast to Katerine, Tarna's long, pale yellow hair was as neat as if she had had a maid attending her before coming downstairs. She was every bit as focused, though, just more controlled. "I also have urgent reason to reach the Tower without any further delay." She gave Gawyn a nod and Rajar a lesser, cool as the marble she seemed carved from. Yet, more friendly than the face she showed Katerine or got in return. There was always a stiffness between the two women, though they shared the same Ajah. They did not like one another, perhaps even disliked each other. With Aes Sedai, it was hard to be sure.

Gawyn would not be sorry to see either leave. Tarna had ridden into Dorlan barely a day after the mysterious army arrived, and however Aes Sedai determined these things, she immediately displaced Lusonia Cole from her room upstairs and Covarla Baldene from command of the eleven other sisters already in the village. She might have been a Green from the way she took charge of everything, questioning the other sisters about the situation, even inspecting the Younglings closely every day as though searching for possible Warders. Having a Red study them that way made the men start looking over their shoulders. Worse, Tarna spent long hours out riding, no matter the weather, trying to find some local who could show her a way into the city past the besiegers. Sooner or later, she would lead their scouts back to Dorlan. Katerine had come only yesterday, in a fury at having her path to Tar Valon blocked,

and straightaway took command from Tarna and her room from Covarla. Not that she used her authority in the same way. She avoided the other sisters, refusing to tell anyone why she had disappeared at Dumai's Wells or where she had been. But she, too, had inspected the Younglings. With an air of a woman examining an axe she had a mind to use, and not a care how much blood was shed. He would not have been surprised if she had tried to bully him into cutting a way to the bridges into the city for her. He would be more than happy to see them go, in fact. But then, when they left, he would have to deal with Narenwin. And with Elaida's orders.

"It's hardly a village, Katerine," the shivering sister said, "just three or four squalid little fisherman's houses a full day downriver by land. More than that from here." Plucking at her damp skirts, she held them nearer the fire. "We may be able to find a way to send messages into the city, but you two are needed here. All that stopped Elaida sending fifty sisters, or more, rather than just me, was the difficulty of getting even one tiny boat across the river unseen, even in darkness. I must say, I was surprised to learn there were any sisters this close to Tar Valon. Under the circumstances, every sister who is outside the city must—"

Tarna cut her off firmly with a raised hand. "Elaida cannot even know I am here." Katerine closed her mouth and frowned, her chin lifting, but she let the other Red continue. "What were her orders to you regarding the sisters in Dorlan, Narenwin?" Rajar took to studying the floor-

boards in front of his boots. He had faced battle without flinching, yet only a fool wanted to be around Aes Sedai who were arguing.

The short woman fussed with her divided skirts a moment longer. "I was ordered to take charge of the sisters I found here," she said stuffily, "and do what I could." After a moment, she sighed, and amended herself reluctantly. "The sisters I found here under Covarla. But, surely—"

This time, Katerine broke in. "I was never under Covarla, Narenwin, so those orders cannot apply to me. In the morning, I will set out to find these three or four fisherman's huts."

"But—"

"Enough, Narenwin," Katerine said in an icy voice. "You can make your arrangements with Covarla." The black-haired woman gave her Ajah sister a glance from the corner of her eye. "I suppose you may accompany me, Tarna. A fishing boat should have room for two." Tarna bent her head the slightest fraction, possibly in thanks.

Their business concluded, the pair of Reds gathered their cloaks around them and glided toward the door deeper into the house. Narenwin shot a vexed look at their backs, and turned her attention to Gawyn, her face settling into the semblance of a calm mask.

"Have you any word of my sister?" he asked before she could open her mouth. "Do you know where she is?"

The woman really was tired. She blinked, and he could almost see her forming an answer that would tell him nothing.

Stopping halfway to the door, Tarna said, "Elayne was with the rebels when I saw her last." Every head jerked toward her. "But your sister is safe from retribution," she went on calmly, "so put that out of your mind. Accepted can't choose which sisters to obey. I give you my word; under the law, she can suffer no lasting harm of it." She seemed unaware of Katerine's frozen stare, or Narenwin's popping eyes.

"You could have told me before this," Gawyn said roughly. No one spoke roughly to Aes Sedai, not more than once, but he was past caring. Were the other two surprised that Tarna knew the answer, or surprised that she had given it? "What do you mean by 'no lasting harm'?"

The pale-haired sister barked a laugh. "I can hardly promise she won't suffer a few welts if she puts her feet too far wrong. Elayne is one of the Accepted, not Aes Sedai. Yet that protects her from greater harm if she is led astray by a sister. And you never asked. Besides, she doesn't need rescuing, even if you could manage it. She is with Aes Sedai. Now you know as much as I can tell you of her, and I am going to find a few hours more sleep before daylight. I will leave you to Narenwin."

Katerine watched her go without altering her expression by an eyelash, a woman of ice with the eyes of a hunting cat, but then she herself strode from the room so quickly that her cloak flared behind her.

"Tarna is correct," Narenwin said once the door closed behind Katerine. The small woman might not make a

good show of Aes Sedai serenity and mystery alongside the other two, but alone she managed very well. "Elayne is sealed to the White Tower. So are you, for all your talk of disowning. The history of Andor seals you to the Tower."

"The Younglings are all sealed to the Tower by our own choice, Narenwin Sedai," Rajar said, making a leg formally. Narenwin's gaze remained on Gawyn.

He closed his eyes, and it was all he could do not to scrub at them with the heels of his hands. The Younglings *were* sealed to the White Tower. No one would ever forget that they had fought, on the very grounds of the Tower, to stop the rescue of a deposed Amyrlin. For good or ill, the tale would follow them to their graves. He was marked by that, as well, and by his own secrets. After all that bloodshed, he was the man who had let Sivan Sanche walk free. More importantly, though, Elayne bound him to the White Tower, and so did Egwene al'Vere, and he did not know which tied the tighter knot, the love of his sister or the love of his heart. To abandon one was to abandon all three, and while he breathed, he could not abandon Elayne or Egwene.

"You have my word that I will do all I can," he said wearily. "What does Elaida want of me?"

The sky above Caemlyn was clear, the sun a pale golden ball near its noonday peak. It shed a brilliant light on the blanket of white covering the surrounding countryside, but gave no warmth. Still, the weather was warmer than Davram Bashere would have expected back home in Saldaea, though

he did not regret the marten-fur lining his new cloak. Cold enough in any case for his breath to have frosted his thick mustaches with more white than the years had put in them. Standing in ankle-deep snow among the leafless trees on a rise perhaps a league north of Caemlyn, he held a long, gold-mounted looking glass to his eye, studying the activity on lower ground about a mile south of him. Quick nosed his shoulder impatiently from behind, but he ignored the bay. Quick disliked standing still, but sometimes you had to, whatever you wanted.

A sprawling camp was going up down there among the scattered trees, astride the road to Tar Valon, soldiers unloading supply wagons, digging latrines, erecting tents and building lean-tos of brush and tree-limbs scattered in clumps of varying size, each lord and lady keeping their own men close. They expected to be in place for some time. From the horse-lines and the general extent of the camp, he estimated close to five thousand men, give or take a few hundred. Fighting men; fletchers, farriers, armorers, laundresses, wagondrivers and other camp-followers as good as doubled that, though as usual they were making their own camp on the fringes. Most of the camp-followers spent more time staring toward the rise where Bashere stood than they did working. Here and there a soldier paused in his labors to peer toward the higher ground, too, but bannermen and squadmen quickly drove them back to their work. The nobles and officers riding about the rising camp never so much as glanced north, that Bashere saw. A fold of

land hid them from the city, though he could see the silver-streaked gray walls from his rise. The city knew they were there, of course; they had announced themselves that morning with trumpets and banners in sight of the walls. Well out of bowshot, though.

Laying siege to a city with high, strong walls that stretched more than six leagues in circumference was no easy matter, and complicated in this instance by Low Caemlyn, the warren of brick and stone houses and shops, windowless warehouses and long markets, that lay outside Caemlyn's walls. Seven more like camps were being made, though, spaced around the city where they could cover every road, every gate that would allow a sizable sortie. They already had patrols out, and likely watchers lurked in the now-deserted buildings of Low Caemlyn. Small parties might get past into the city, maybe a few pack animals by night, but not near enough to feed one of the world's great cities. Hunger and disease ended more sieges than swords or siege-engines ever did. The only question was whether they brought down besieged or besieger first.

The plan seemingly had all been well thought-out by someone, but what confused him were the banners in the camp below. It was a strong looking glass, crafted by a Cairhienin named Tovere, a gift from Rand al'Thor, and he could make out most of the banners whenever a breeze straightened them. He knew enough of Andoran sigils to pick out the Oak and Axe of Dawlin Armagh and the five Silver Stars of Daerilla Raned and several more banners of

lesser nobles who supported Naeen Arawn's claim to the Lion Throne and the Rose Crown of Andor. Yet Jailin Maran's cross-hatched Red Wall was down there, too, and Carlys Ankerin's paired White Leopards, and Eram Talkend's golden Winged Hand. By all reports, they were oathsworn to Naeen's rival, Elenia Sarand. Seeing them with the others was like seeing wolves and wolfhounds sharing a meal. With a cask of good wine opened in the bargain.

Two other banners, gold-fringed and at least twice the size of any others, were on display as well, though both were too heavy for the occasional gust to make them more than stir. They shone with the glisten of thick silk. He had seen the pair clearly enough earlier, however, when the bannermen rode back and forth atop the rise that hid their camp, the banners spread out above them in the breeze of their gallop. One was the Lion of Andor, white on red, the same as flew from the tall round towers dotted along the city wall. In both cases it was a declaration of someone's right to the throne and crown. The second large banner below him proclaimed the woman throwing her claim against that of Elayne Trakand. Four silver moons on a field of twilight blue, the sign of House Marne. All this was in support of Arymilla Marne? A month ago, she would have been lucky if anyone except her own House or that half-witted Nasin Caeren gave her a bed for the night!

"They ignore us," Bael growled. "I could break them before sunset, and leave not one alive to see the sun rise again, yet they ignore us."

Bashere looked sideways at the Aielman. Sideways and up. The man towered above him by well over a foot. Only Bael's gray eyes and a strip of sun-dark skin were visible above the black veil drawn across his face. Bashere hoped the man was just shielding his mouth and nose from the cold. He was carrying his short spears and bull-hide buckler, and he had a cased bow on his back and a quiver at his hip, but only the veil mattered. This was no time for the Aiel to start killing. Twenty paces downslope toward the camp, thirty more Aielmen were squatting on their heels, holding their weapons casually. One in three had his face bare, so maybe it was the cold. With Aiel, you could never be sure, though.

Quickly considering several approaches, Bashere decided on lightness. "Elayne Trakand would not like that, Bael, and if you've forgotten what it's like being a young man, that means Rand al'Thor won't like it."

Bael grunted sourly. "Melaine told me what Elayne Trakand said. We must do nothing on her part. That is simple-minded. When an enemy comes against you, you make use of whoever will dance the spears by your side. Do they play at war the way they play at their Game of Houses?"

"We are outlanders, Bael. That counts, in Andor."

The huge Aielman grunted again.

There seemed no point trying to explain the politics involved. Outland help could cost Elayne what she was trying to gain, and her enemies knew it and knew she knew it, so they had no fear of Bashere or Bael or the Legion of the Dragon, whatever their numbers. In fact, despite the

siege, both sides would go to great effort to avoid pitched battle. It was a war, but of maneuver and skirmishes unless someone blundered, and the winner would be whoever gained an unassailable position or forced the other into one that could not be defended. Bael likely would see it as no different from *Daes Daemar*. In all truth, Bashere saw a great deal of similarity himself. With the Blight on its doorstep, Saldaea could not afford contests for the throne. Tyrants could be endured, and the Blight soon killed the stupid and the greedy, but even this peculiar sort of civil war would allow the Blight to kill Saldaea.

He returned to studying the camp through his looking glass, trying to puzzle out how an utter fool like Arymilla Marne could have gained the backing of Naeen Arawn and Elenia Sarand. That pair was greedy and ambitious, each utterly convinced of her own right to the throne, and if he understood the tangled web Andorans used to decide these matters, each had far better claim than Arymilla. Wolves and wolfhounds were not in it. This was wolves deciding to follow a lapdog. Perhaps Elayne knew the reason, but she would barely even exchange notes with him, brief and uninformative. Too much chance someone would learn of it and think she was plotting with him. It was *very* like the Game of Houses.

"Someone is going to dance the spears, it seems," Bael said, and Bashere lowered the ornate tube long enough to find where the Aielman was pointing.

There had been a steady stream of people fleeing the city

ahead of the siege for days, but someone had left it too late. Half a dozen canvas-topped wagons stood halted in the middle of the Tar Valon Road just outside the edge of Low Caemlyn, surrounded by fifty horsemen under a blue-and-white quartered banner that appeared to show a running bear, or maybe some sort of thick-bodied hound, when it rippled in a sudden wind. Dispirited folk huddled to one side, clutching cloaks around themselves, men with their heads down, children clinging to women's skirts. Some of the horsemen had dismounted to ransack the wagons; chests and boxes and even what looked to be clothes already dotted the snow. Likely they were searching for coin or drink, though any other valuable that turned up would go into someone's saddlebags, too. Soon enough someone would cut free the wagon teams, or perhaps they would just take the wagons. Wagons and horses were always useful for an army, and the peculiar rules of this very peculiar Andoran civil war did not appear to give much protection to those who were in the wrong place at the wrong time. But the city gates were swinging open, and as soon as the gap was wide enough, red-coated lancers poured out of the twenty-foot-high arch at a gallop, sunlight glittering on lance-points and breastplates and helmets, thundering down the road between the long, empty markets. The Queen's Guards were coming out. Enough of them, anyway. Bashere swung his glass back to the wagons.

Apparently the officer under the bear, if a bear it was, had done his sums already. Fifty against two hundred made

very poor odds, with only a few wagons at stake. The men who had dismounted were back in their saddles, and even as Bashere found them, the lot of them galloped away north toward him, the blue-and-white banner streaming behind its staff. Most of the people huddled beside the road stared after the departing soldiers, their confusion as clear as if he had been able to make out their faces, but a few immediately rushed to begin gathering up their scattered belongings out of the snow and piling them back into the wagons.

The arrival of the Guardsmen, drawing rein around the wagons a few minutes later, put a quick end to that. Guardsmen quickly began herding people toward the wagons. Some still tried to dart past them for some prized belonging, and one man began waving his arms in protest at a Guardsman, an obvious officer with white plumes on his helmet and a red sash across his breastplate, but the officer leaned from the saddle and backhanded the protester in the face. The fellow went down on his back like a stone, and after one frozen moment, everyone who was not already scrambling onto the wagons went scurrying, except a pair of men who paused to pick up the fallen man by his shoulders and heels, and they hurried as best they could carrying his limp weight. A woman up on the last wagon in line was already lashing her reins to get her team turned around and headed back toward the city.

Bashere lowered the glass to study the camp, then pressed it back to his eye for a closer look. Men were still digging away with shovel and mattock, and others wrestling sacks

and barrels down from wagons. Nobles and officers walked their horses about the camp, keeping an eye on the work. All calm as cattle in pasture. Finally, someone pointed toward the rise between them and the city, then another and another, and mounted men began to trot, plainly shouting orders. The bear-banner was just coming into sight of the camp on the height.

Tucking the glass beneath his arm, Bashere frowned. They had no guards on the high ground to warn them of what might be happening beyond their sight. Even in the certainty no one was going to offer battle, that was stupid. It might also be useful, if the other camps were as careless, and if no one corrected the mistake. He puffed irritably through his mustaches. If he had been going to fight the besiegers.

A glance showed him the wagons halfway back to the Tar Valon Gate with their escort of Guardsmen, the wagondrivers lashing their teams as if pursuit were breathing down their necks. Or maybe it was just the officer with the sash, who was waving his sword over his head for some reason. "There'll be no dancing today," he said.

"Then I have better to do with my day than watch wetlanders dig holes," Bael replied. "May you always find water and shade, Davram Bashere."

"At the moment, I'd rather have dry feet and a warm fire," Bashere muttered without thinking, then wished he had not. Step on a man's formality and he might try to kill you, and the Aiel were formal and strange besides.

But Bael threw back his head and laughed. "The wetlands turn everything on its head, Davram Bashere." A curious gesture of his right hand brought the other Aiel to their feet, and they loped off eastward in long, easy strides. The snow did not seem to give them any difficulty.

Sliding his looking glass into the leather case hanging from Quick's saddlebow, Bashere mounted and turned the bay west. His own escort had been waiting on the reverse slope, and they fell in behind him with only the faint creak of leather and never a jingle of unsecured metal. They numbered fewer than Bael's escort, but they were tough men from his estates at Tyr, and he had led them into the Blight many times before bringing them south. Every man had his assigned part of the trail to watch, ahead or behind, left or right, high or low, and their heads swiveled constantly. He hoped they were not just going through the motions. The forest was sparse here, every branch bare except on oak and leatherleaf, pine and fir, but the snow-covered land rolled so that a hundred mounted men could be fifty paces away and unseen. Not that he expected any such thing, but then, what killed you was always what you never expected. Unconsciously, he eased his sword in its scabbard. You just had to expect the unexpected.

Tumad had command of the escort, as he did most days Bashere did not have something more important for the young lieutenant to do. He could think clearly and see beyond what was in front of him; he was destined for higher rank, if he lived long enough. A tall man, if a couple

of hands shorter than Bael, today he wore disgruntlement on his face like a second nose.

“What troubles you, Tumad?”

“The Aielman was right, my lord.” Tumad tugged angrily at his thick black beard with a gauntleted fist. “These Andorans spit at our feet. I do not like having to ride away while they thumb an ear at us.” Well, he was still young.

“You find our situation boring, perhaps?” Bashere laughed. “You need more excitement? Tenobia is only fifty leagues north of us, and if rumor can be believed, she brought Ethenielle of Kandor and Paita of Arafel and even that Shienaran Easar with her. All the might of the Borderlands come looking for us, Tumad. Those Andorans down in Murandy don’t like us being in Andor, either, so I hear, and if that Aes Sedai army they’re facing doesn’t chop them to pieces, or hasn’t already, they may come looking for us. So may the Aes Sedai, for that matter, sooner or later. We’ve ridden for the Dragon Reborn, and I can’t see any sister forgetting that. And then there are the Seanchan, Tumad. Do you really think we’ve seen the last of them? They will come to us, or we will have to go to them; one or the other is sure. You young men don’t know excitement when it’s crawling in your mustache!”

Quiet chuckles rippled through the men following, men as old as Bashere himself for the most part, and even Tumad flashed white teeth through his beard in a grin. They had all been on campaign before, if never one so odd as this.

Straightening around, Bashere watched the way through the trees, but with only half his attention.

In all truth, Tenobia did worry him. The Light only knew why Easar and the others had decided to leave the Blight-border together, much less strip away as many soldiers as hearsay said they had brought south. Even hearsay divided by half. Doubtless they had reasons they considered good and sufficient, and doubtless Tenobia shared them. But he knew her; he had taught her to ride, watched her grow up, presented her the Broken Crown when she took the throne. She was a good ruler, neither too heavy-handed nor too light, intelligent if not always wise, brave without being foolhardy, but impulsive was a mild description of her. Sometimes “hot-headed” was mild. And he was as sure as he could be that she had her own goal aside from whatever the others aimed at. The head of Davram Bashere. If that was so, she was unlikely to settle for another period of exile, after coming this far. The longer Tenobia worried a bone in her teeth, the harder it was to convince her to give it up. It was a neat problem. She should be in Saldaea guarding the Blightborder, but so should he. She could convict him of treason twice over at least for what he had done since coming south, but he still could see no other way to have gone. Rebellion—Tenobia could define that loosely when she chose—rebellion was horrible to contemplate, yet he wanted his head firmly attached to his neck a while longer. A neat and thorny problem.

The encampment containing the eight thousand-odd

light cavalry he had left after Illian and the Seanchan spread wider than the camp back on the Tar Valon Road, but it could not be said to sprawl. The horselines were uniform rows with a farrier's forge at either end, stretched between equally straight rows of large gray or shell-white tents, though those showed a good many patches, now. Every man could be mounted and ready to fight inside a count of fifty from a trumpet signal, and his sentries were placed to make sure they had that count and more. Even the camp-followers' tents and wagons, a hundred paces south of the rest, were more orderly than the soldiers' besieging the city, as though they had followed the example of the Saldaeans. Somewhat, at least.

As he rode in with his escort, men moved quickly and grimly among the horselines, almost as if the signal to mount had been sounded. More than one had his sword drawn. Voices called to him, but at the sight of a large crowd of men and women, mostly women, gathered in the center of the camp, he felt a sudden numbness inside. He dug in his heels, and Quick sprang forward at a gallop. He did not know whether anyone followed him or not. He heard nothing but the blood pounding in his ears, saw nothing but the crowd in front of his own sharp-peaked tent. The tent he shared with Deira.

He did not rein in on reaching the crowd, just threw himself out of the saddle and hit the ground running. He heard people speak without taking in what they were say-

ing. They parted in front of him, opening a path to his tent, or he would have run them over.

Just inside the tentflaps, he halted. The tent, large enough for twenty soldiers to sleep in, was crowded to the walls with women, wives of nobles and officers, but his eyes quickly found his own wife, Deira, seated on a folding chair in the middle of the carpets that served for a floor, and the numbness faded. He knew she would die one day—they both would—but the only thing he feared was living without her. Then he realized that some of the women were helping her to lower her dress to her waist. Another was pressing a folded cloth to Deira's left arm, and the cloth was growing red as blood ran down her arm in a sheet and dripped from her fingers into a bowl set on the carpet. There was a considerable amount of dark blood already in the bowl.

She saw him at the same instant, and her eyes flashed in a face that was much too pale. "It comes from hiring outlanders, husband," she said fiercely, her right hand shaking a long dagger at him. As tall as most men, inches taller than he, and beautiful, her face framed with raven hair winged with white, she had a commanding presence that could become imperious when she was angry. Even when she obviously could barely sit upright. Most women would have been flustered at being bare to the waist in front of so many, with her husband present. Not Deira. "If you did not always insist on moving like the wind, we could have good men from our own estates to do whatever was needful."

"A dispute with servants, Deira?" he said, cocking an eye-

brow. "I never thought you'd start taking knives to them." Several of the women gave him cool, sidelong glances. Not every man and wife dealt together as he and Deira did. Some thought them odd, since they seldom shouted.

Deira scowled at him, then grunted a short, involuntary laugh. "I will start at the beginning, Davram. And go slowly, so you can understand," she added with a small smile, pausing to thank the women who draped a white linen sheet around her bare torso. "I returned from my ride to find two strange men ransacking our tent. They drew daggers, so naturally, I hit one of them with a chair and stabbed the other." She directed a grimace at her cut arm. "Not well enough, since he managed to touch me. Then Zavion and some of the others came in, and the pair fled through a slit they had made in the rear of the tent."

Several of the women nodded grimly and gripped the hilts of the daggers they all wore. Until Deira said darkly, "I told them to give chase, but they insisted on tending my scratch." Hands dropped away from hilts, and faces colored, though none looked in the least apologetic for disobeying. They had been in a ticklish position. Deira was their liege lady as he was their liege lord, but whether or not she called it a scratch, she could have bled to death if they had left her to go chasing the thieves. "In any event," she went on, "I ordered a search. They won't be hard to find. One has a lump on his head, and the other is bleeding." She gave a sharp, satisfied nod.

Zavion, the sinewy, red-haired Lady of Gahaur, held up

a threaded needle. "Unless you have taken up an interest in embroidery, my Lord," she said coolly, "may I suggest that you withdraw?"

Bashere acquiesced with a small bow of his head. Deira never liked him to watch her being sewn up. He never liked watching her being sewn up.

Outside the tent, he paused to announce in a loud voice that his lady wife was well and being tended, and that they should all go on about their business. The men departed with wishes for Deira's well-being, but none of the women stirred a foot. He did not press them. They would remain until Deira herself appeared, whatever he said, and a wise man tried to avoid battles he would not only lose, but look foolish losing.

Tumad was waiting on the edge of the crowd, and he fell in beside Bashere, who walked with his hands clasped tightly behind his back. He had been expecting this, or something like, for a long time, but he had almost begun to think it would not happen. And he had never expected Deira to nearly die because of it.

"The two men have been found, my Lord," Tumad said. "At least, they apparently meet the description the Lady Deira gave." Bashere's head jerked around, murder on his face, and the younger man quickly added, "They were dead, my Lord, just outside the camp. Each got one thrust with a narrow blade." He stabbed a finger at the base of his skull, just behind the ear. "It had to be more than one did it, unless he was faster than a rock viper."

GLIMMERS: The Prologue to CROSSROADS OF TWILIGHT

Bashere nodded. The price of failure often was death. Two to search, and how many to silence them? How many remained, and how long before they tried again? Worst of all, who was behind it? The White Tower? The Forsaken? It seemed a decision had been reached for him.

No one except Tumad was close enough to hear him, but he spoke softly anyway, and chose his words cautiously. Sometimes, the price of carelessness was death, too. "You know where to find the man who came to me yesterday? Find him, and tell him I agree, but there will be a few more than we talked about."

The light feathery snow falling on the city of Cairhien dimmed the morning sunlight only a little, just muting the brightness. From the tall narrow window in the Sun Palace, fitted with a casement of good glass panes against the cold, Samitsu could see clearly the wooden scaffolding erected around the ruined section of the palace, broken cubes of dark stone still littered with rubble and stepped towers that stopped abruptly short of equaling the rest of the palace's towers. One, the Tower of the Risen Sun, was simply no longer there. Several of the city's fabled "topless" towers loomed through the drifting white flakes, enormous square spires with huge buttresses, much taller by far than any in the palace despite its location on the highest hill in a city of hills. They were wrapped in their own scaffolds and still not completely rebuilt twenty years after the Aiel had burned them; another twenty might see them done. There were no

workmen clambering along the planks on any of the scaffolding, of course, not in this weather. She found herself wishing the snow could give her a respite, too.

When Cadsuane departed a week past, leaving her in charge, her task had appeared straightforward. Make sure the Cairhienin pot did not begin to boil again. That had appeared a simple task at the time, though she had seldom dabbled in politics to speak of. Only one noble retained sizable forces under arms, and Dobraine was cooperative, for the most part, seeming to want everything kept quiet. Of course, he had accepted that fool appointment as “Steward of Cairhien for the Dragon Reborn.” The boy had named a “Steward” of Tear, too, a man who had been in rebellion against him a month gone! If he had done as much in Illian . . . It seemed all too probable. Those appointments would cause no end of trouble for sisters to sort out before all was said and done! The boy brought *nothing* but trouble! Yet so far Dobraine seemed to be using his new post only to run the city. And to quietly rally support for Elayne Trakand’s claim to the Sun Throne, if she ever made one. Samitsu was satisfied to leave it at that, not caring one way or another who took the Sun Throne. She did not care much for Cairhien at all.

The falling snow beyond her window swirled in a gust of wind like a white kaleidoscope. So . . . tranquil. Had she ever valued tranquility before? She certainly could not recall it, if she had.

Neither the possibility of Elayne Trakand taking the

throne nor Dobraine's new title had brought nearly as much consternation as the ridiculous, and ridiculously persistent, rumors about the al'Thor boy going to Tar Valon to submit to Elaida, though she had done nothing to quell those. That tale had everyone from nobles to stablemen half afraid to breathe, which was very well and good for maintaining the peace. The Game of Houses had ground to a halt; well, compared to how matters normally were in Cairhien. The Aiel who came into the city from their huge camp a few miles east very likely helped, however much they were hated by the general run of folk. Everyone knew they followed the Dragon Reborn, and no one wanted to risk finding themselves on the wrong end of thousands of Aiel spears. Young al'Thor was *much* more useful absent than present. Rumors out of the west of Aiel raiding elsewhere—looting, burning, killing indiscriminately, so merchants' hearsay claimed—gave people another reason to step gingerly with those here.

In fact, there seemed to be no burrs to prick Cairhien out of its quiet, aside from the occasional street brawl between Foregaters and city folk who considered the noisy, brightly clad Foregaters as alien as the Aiel and a good deal safer to fight. The city was crowded to the attics, with people sleeping anywhere they could find shelter from the cold, yet food supplies were more than adequate if not overabundant, and trade was actually better than expected in winter. All in all, she should have felt content that she was carrying out Cadsuane's instructions as well as the Green could

wish for. Except that Cadsuane would expect more. She always did.

"Are you listening to me, Samitsu?"

Sighing, Samitsu turned from the peaceful view through the window, taking pains not to smooth her yellow-slashed skirts. The Jakanda-made silver bells in her hair tinkled faintly, but today the sound failed to soothe her. At the best of times she did not feel entirely comfortable in her apartments in the palace, though a blazing fire in the wide marble fireplace gave a good warmth and the bed in the next room had the best-quality feather mattresses and goose-down pillows. All three of her rooms were overly ornate in the severe Cairhienin fashion, the white ceiling plaster worked in interlocking squares, the wide bar-cornices heavily gilded, and the wooden wall-panels polished to a soft glow yet dark even so. The furnishings were darker still, and massively constructed, edged with thin lines of gold leaf and inlaid with patterned ivory wedges. The flowered Tairen carpet in this room seemed garishly disordered compared to everything else, and emphasized the surrounding stiffness. It all seemed too much like a cage, of late.

What really discomfited her, though, was the woman with her hair in ringlets to her shoulders standing in the middle of the carpet, fists on her hips, a belligerent set to her chin, and a frown narrowing her blue eyes. Sashalle wore the Great Serpent ring, of course, on her right hand, but also an Aiel necklace and bracelet, fat beads of silver and ivory intricately worked and carved, gaudy against her high-

necked dress of brown wool, which was plain if fine and well-cut. Not crude pieces, certainly, but . . . flamboyant, and hardly the sort a sister would wear. The oddity of that jewelry might hold the key to much, if Samitsu could ever find the reason behind it. The Wise Ones, especially Sorilea, looked at her as if she were a fool for not knowing without asking, and refused to be bothered with answering. They did that all too often. *Most* especially Sorilea. Samitsu was unused to being thought a fool, and she disliked it immensely.

Not for the first time, she found it difficult to meet the other sister's gaze. Sashalle was the major reason contentment eluded her, no matter how well everything was going otherwise. Most maddening, Sashalle was a Red, yet despite her Ajah, she was *oathsworn* to young al'Thor. How could any Aes Sedai swear fealty to a man who could channel? Maybe Verin had been right about *ta'veren* twisting chance. Samitsu could not begin to think of any other reason for thirty-one sisters, *five* of them Red, to take such an oath.

"The Lady Ailil has been approached by lords and ladies who represent most of House Riatin's strength," she replied, much more patiently than she felt. "They want her to take the High Seat of Riatin, and she wants White Tower approval. Aes Sedai approval, at least." For something to do besides match stares—and likely lose—she moved to a blackwood table where a gold-worked silver pitcher sitting on a silver tray still gave off the faint scent of spices. Filling a cup with mulled wine provided an excuse to break the fleeting eye con-

tact. Needing an excuse made her replace the pitcher on the tray with a sharp clink. She found herself avoiding looking at Sashalle too often. Even now, she realized she was looking at the other woman sideways. To her frustration, she could not quite make herself turn completely to meet her stare.

"Tell her no, Sashalle. Her brother was still alive when last seen, and rebellion against the Dragon Reborn is nothing that need concern the Tower; certainly not now it's done with." The memory arose of Toram Riatin as last seen, running off into a strange fog that could take on solid form and kill, a fog that resisted the One Power. The Shadow had walked outside the walls of Cairhien that day. Samitsu's voice tightened from the effort to stop it short of trembling. Not with fear, but anger. That had been the day she failed at Healing young al'Thor. She hated failures, hated remembering them. And she should not have to explain herself. "Most of Riatin's strength is not all. Those still tied to Toram will oppose her, with force of arms if necessary, and in any case, fostering upheaval inside the Houses themselves is no way to maintain the peace. There is a precarious balance in Cairhien now, Sashalle, but it *is* a balance, and we mustn't disturb it." She managed to stop short of saying Cadsuane would be displeased if they did. That would hardly carry weight with Sashalle.

"Upheaval will come whether or not we foster it," the other sister said firmly. Her frown had faded as soon as Samitsu showed she had been listening, though the set of her jaw remained. Perhaps it was stubbornness rather than

belligerence, yet that hardly mattered. The woman was not arguing or trying to convince her, just stating her own position. And most galling of all, plainly doing that much as a courtesy. "The Dragon Reborn is the herald of upheaval and change, Samitsu. The herald foretold. And if he weren't, this is Cairhien. Do you think they have really stopped playing at *Daes dae'mar*? The surface of the water may be still, but the fish never stop swimming."

A Red, preaching the Dragon Reborn like a streetcorner demagogue! Light! "And if you are wrong?" In spite of herself, Samitsu bit off the words. Sashalle—burn her!—maintained a perfect serenity.

"Ailil has forsworn any claim to the Sun Throne in favor of Elayne Trakand, which is what the Dragon Reborn desires, and she is ready to swear fealty to him, if I ask it. Toram led an army against Rand al'Thor. I say the change is worth making and the chance worth taking, and I will tell her so."

The bells in Samitsu's hair chimed at an irritated shake of her head, and she barely managed to stop herself from sighing again. Eighteen of those Dragonsworn sisters remained in Cairhien—Cadsuane had carried some away with her, then sent Alanna back to take off still more—and others of the eighteen besides Sashalle stood higher than she, but the Aiel Wise Ones kept them out of her way. In principle, she disapproved of how that was done—Aes Sedai *could* not be apprentices, not to anyone! It was outrageous!—but in practice, it did make her job easier. They could not meddle

or try to take charge with Wise Ones running their lives and watching over their every hour. Unfortunately, for some reason she could not learn, the Wise Ones looked differently on Sashalle and the other two sisters who had been stilled at Dumai's Wells. Stilled. She felt a faint shiver at the thought, but only faint, and it would be less if she ever managed to work out how Damer Flinn had Healed what could not be Healed. At least *someone* could Heal stilling, even if it was a man. A man channeling Light, how the horror of yesterday became merely the uneasiness of today, once you grew accustomed.

She was sure that Cadsuane would have arranged matters with the Wise Ones before leaving had she known about the difference with Sashalle and Irgain and Ronaille. At least, she thought she was sure. This was not the first time she had been pulled into one of the legendary Green's designs. Cadsuane could be more devious than a Blue, schemes inside plots wrapped in stratagems and all hidden behind still others. Some were planned to fail in order to help others succeed, and only Cadsuane knew which were which, not at all a comforting thought. In any case, those three sisters were free to come and go as they desired, do as they desired. And they certainly felt no need to follow the guidance Cadsuane had left behind or to follow the sister she had named to lead. Only their mad oath to al'Thor guided or constrained them.

Samitsu had never felt weak or ineffectual in her life except when her Talent failed her, yet she very much wished

that Cadsuane would return and take matters out of her hands. A few words delivered in Ailil's ear would quench any desire the lady had to mount the High Seat, of course, yet it would come to nothing unless she found some way to deflect Sashalle from her purpose. No matter that Ailil feared having her silly secrets aired abroad, inconsistency in what Aes Sedai told her could well make her decide it was better to try vanishing to her country estates rather than risk offending a sister whatever she did. Cadsuane would be upset over losing Ailil. Samitsu herself would be upset. Ailil was a conduit into half the plots brewing among the nobles, a gauge to be sure those intrigues were all still petty and unlikely to bring any major disturbance. The cursed Red knew that. And once Sashalle gave Ailil this permission, it would be her the woman came running to with her news, not Samitsu Tamagowa.

While Samitsu was floundering in her quandary, the door to the hallway opened to admit a pale, stern-faced Cairhienin woman, a hand shorter than either Aes Sedai. Her hair was in a thick gray roll on the nape of her neck, and she wore an unadorned gray dress so dark it was nearly black, the current livery of a Sun Palace servant. Servants never announced themselves or asked admittance, of course, but Corgaide Marendevin was hardly just another servant; the heavy silvery ring of long keys at her waist was a badge of office. Whoever ruled Cairhien, the Holder of the Keys ruled the Sun Palace in simple fact, and there was nothing submissive in Corgaide's manner. She made a minimal

curtsy carefully aimed halfway between Samitsu and Sashalle.

"I was asked to report anything unusual," she said to the air, though it had been Samitsu who asked. Very likely, she had known of the power struggle between them as soon as they did themselves. Little in the palace escaped her. "I am told there is an Ogier in the kitchens. He and a young man supposedly are looking after work as masons, but I have never heard of Ogier and human masons working together. And *Stedding* Tsofu sent word no masons would be available from any *stedding* for the foreseeable future, when we inquired after . . . the incident." The pause was barely perceptible, and her grave expression did not alter, but half the gossip about the attack on the Sun Palace laid it to al'Thor's doing, the other half to Aes Sedai. A few tales mentioned the Forsaken, but only to pair them with either al'Thor or the Aes Sedai.

Pursing her lips in thought, Samitsu set aside the cursed tangle Cairhienin made of everything they touched. Denials of Aes Sedai involvement did little good; the Three Oaths only went so far in a city where a simple yes or no could give rise to six contradictory rumors. But, Ogier . . . The palace kitchens scarcely took in stray passersby, yet the cooks very likely would give an Ogier a hot meal just for the strangeness of seeing him. Ogier were even more uncommon than usual, this last year or so. A few were still seen now and then, but walking as fast as only an Ogier could, and seldom stopping in one place more than long enough to sleep. They

rarely traveled with humans, however, much less worked with them. The pairing tickled something in her mind, though. Hoping to tease whatever it was into the open, she opened her mouth to ask a few questions.

"Thank you, Corgaide," Sashalle said with a smile. "You've been most helpful. But if you will leave us, now?" Being abrupt with the Holder of the Keys was a good way to find yourself with dirty bed-linens and poorly spiced meals, unemptied chamberpots and messages that went astray, a thousand annoyances that could make life a misery and leave you wading in mud trying to accomplish anything at all, yet somehow, that smile appeared to take the sting out of her words for Corgaide. The gray-haired woman bowed her head slightly in assent and again made the smallest possible curtsy. This time, obviously to Sashalle.

No sooner had the door closed behind the gray-haired woman than Samitsu thumped her silver cup back on the tray hard enough to splash warm wine over her wrist and rounded on the Red sister. She was on the brink of losing control of Ailil, and now the Sun Palace itself appeared to be slipping through her fingers! It was as likely Corgaide would sprout wings and fly as keep silent about what she had seen here, and whatever she said would flash through the palace and infect every servant down to the men who mucked out the stables. That final curtsy had made it quite clear what she thought. Light, but Samitsu hated Cairhien! The customs of civility between sisters were deeply ingrained, but Sashalle did not stand high enough to make

her hold her tongue in the face of this disaster, and she intended to deliver the rough side of it.

Frowning at the other woman, though, she saw Sashalle's face—*really* saw it, perhaps for the first time—and suddenly she knew why it troubled her so, perhaps even why she had found it difficult to look directly at the Red sister. It was no longer an Aes Sedai face, outside of time and standing apart from age. Most people were unsure of the look until it was pointed out, but it was unmistakable to another sister. Perhaps some bits remained, scraps that made Sashalle appear closer to beautiful than she really was, yet anyone at all would put an age to her, somewhere short of her middle years. The realization froze Samitsu's tongue.

What was known about women who had been stilled was little better than rumor. They ran away and hid from other sisters; eventually, they died. Usually, they died soon rather than late. The loss of *saidar* was more than most women could bear for very long. But it was all really tittle-tattle; as far as she knew, no one in a very long time had had the nerve to try learning more. The rarely acknowledged fear in the darkest corner of every sister's head, that the same fate might come to her one day in a careless moment, kept anyone from wanting to know too much. Even Aes Sedai could hide their eyes when they did not want to see. There were always those rumors, though, almost never mentioned and so vague you could never recall where you heard them first, whispers on the edge of hearing, yet forever floating about. One that Samitsu had only half

remembered, till now, said that a woman who was stilled grew young again, if she lived. It had always seemed ludicrous, till now. Regaining the ability to channel had not given Sashalle back everything. Once more she would have to work with the Power for years to gain the face that would proclaim her Aes Sedai to any sister who could see her clearly. Or . . . would she regain it? It seemed inevitable, yet this was unmapped terrain. And if her face was changed, was anything else about her changed as well? Samitsu shivered, harder than she had for the thought of stilling. Perhaps it was as well she had gone slow in trying to puzzle out Damer's way of Healing.

Fingering her Aiel necklace, Sashalle seemed unaware that Samitsu had any grievance over her behavior, unaware of Samitsu's scrutiny. "This may be nothing, or it may warrant looking into," she said, "but Corgaide was only reporting what she heard. If we want to learn anything, we must go and see for ourselves." Without another word, she gathered her skirts and started out of the apartments, leaving Samitsu only a choice between following or remaining behind. It was intolerable! Yet remaining was unthinkable.

Sashalle was no taller than she, not to speak of, but she had to hurry to keep up as the Red glided swiftly along wide, square-vaulted corridors. Taking the lead was out of the question, unless she chose to run. She fumed in silence, though it required gritting her teeth. Arguing with another sister in public was improper at best. Worse, without any doubt, it would be futile. And that would only dig the hole

she was in deeper. She felt a very great desire to kick something.

Standlamps at regular intervals gave plenty of light even in the darkest stretches of hallway, but there was little color or decoration beyond the occasional tapestry with everything in it arranged in orderly fashion, whether animals being hunted or nobles fighting gallantly in battle. A few niches in the walls held ornaments of gold or Sea Folk porcelain, and in some corridors the cornices were worked in friezes, most left unpainted. That was all. Cairhienin hid their opulence out of public view, as they did with so much. The serving men and women who hurried industriously along the halls like streams of ants wore livery the color of charcoal, except for those in service to nobles resident in the palace, who seemed bright beside the rest, with their House badges embroidered on their breasts, and their collars and sometimes sleeves marked in House colors. One or two even had a coat or dress all in House colors, and appeared almost an outlander among the others. But they all kept their eyes down and barely paused long enough to offer quick bows or curtsies to the two sisters as they passed. The Sun Palace required countless hundreds of servants, and it seemed they were all scurrying about this morning tending their chores.

Nobles strolled the hallways, too, offering their own cautious courtesies to the Aes Sedai as they passed, perhaps with a greeting carefully balanced between an illusion of equality and the true state of affairs, spoken in low voices

that did not carry far. They proved the old saying that strange times make for strange traveling companions. Old enmities had been put away in the face of new dangers. For the moment. Here, two or three pale Cairhienin lords in dark silk coats with thin stripes of color across the front, some with the fronts of their heads shaved and powdered soldier-fashion, promenaded alongside an equal number of dark Tairens, taller in their bright coats with fat, striped sleeves. There, a Tairen noblewoman in a snug pearl-sewn cap, colorfully brocaded gown, and pale lace ruff walked arm-in-arm beside a shorter Cairhienin noble with her hair in an elaborate tower that reached well above her companion's head, smoky gray lace under her chin, and narrow stripes of her House colors cascading down the front of her wide-skirted dark silk. All like bosom-friends and trusted confidants.

Some pairings did look odder than others. A number of women had begun wearing outlandish clothes of late, apparently never noticing how they drew men's eyes and made even the servants struggle not to stare. Tight breeches and a coat barely long enough to cover the hips were not suitable garments for a woman, no matter how much effort went into rich embroidery or patterning the coat with gemstones. Jeweled necklaces and bracelets and pins with sprays of colorful feathers only pointed up the oddity. And those brightly dyed boots, with their heels that added as much as a hand to a woman's height, made them appear in danger of falling down with every swaying step.

"Scandalous." Sashalle muttered, eyeing one such pair of women and twitching her skirts in displeasure.

"Scandalous," Samitsu murmured before she could stop herself, then snapped her mouth shut so hard her teeth clicked. She needed to control her tongue. Voicing agreement just because she agreed was a habit she could ill-afford with Sashalle.

Still, she could not help glancing back at the pair in disapproval. And a bit of wonder. A year ago, Alaine Chulian-dred and Fionnda Annariz would have been at each other's throats. Or rather have had their armsmen at one another's throats. But then, who would have expected to see Bertome Saighan walking peacefully with Weiramon Saniago, neither man reaching for the dagger at his belt? Strange times and strange traveling companions. Doubtless they were playing the Game of Houses, maneuvering for advantage as they always had, yet dividing lines that once were graven in stone now turned out to have been drawn on water instead. Very strange times.

The kitchens were on the lowest level of the Sun Palace above ground, at the back, a cluster of stone-walled beam-ceiling rooms centered around a long windowless room full of iron stoves and brick ovens and dressed-stone fireplaces, and the heat was enough to make anyone forget the snow outside, or even that it was winter. Normally, sweaty-faced cooks and under-cooks, as darkly clad as any other palace servants beneath their white aprons, would have been scurrying about getting ready to prepare the midday meal,

kneading loaves on long flour-strewn tables topped with marble, basting the joints and fowl that were turning on spits in the fireplaces. Now, only the trotting spit-dogs were moving, eager to earn their bits from the joints. Baskets of turnips and carrots stood unpeeled and unchopped, and smells sweet and spicy came from untended pots of sauces. Even the scullions, boys and girls surreptitiously wiping their faces on their aprons, stood on the fringe of a group of women clustered around one of the tables. From the doorway, Samitsu could see the back of an Ogier's head rising above them where he was seated at the table, taller than most men would have been standing up, and broad with it. Of course, Cairhienin were short by and large, and that helped. She laid a hand on Sashalle's arm, and for a wonder, the woman stopped where they were without protest.

"... vanished without leaving a clue where he was going?" the Ogier was asking in a deep rumble like the earth shifting. His long, tufted ears, sticking up through dark hair that hung to his high collar, flicked back and forth uneasily.

"Oh, do stop talking about him, Master Ledar," a woman's voice answered in a quaver that seemed well-practiced. "Wicked, he was. Tore half the palace apart with the One Power, he did. He could turn your blood to ice just looking at you, and kill you as soon as look. Thousands have died by his own hand. Tens of thousands! Oh, I never like talking about him."

"For someone as never likes talking about something, Eldrid Methin," another woman said sharply, "you surely talk

of little else." Stout and quite tall for a Cairhiein, nearly as tall as Samitsu herself, with a few strands of gray hair escaping her white plain-lace cap, she must have been the chief cook on duty, because everyone Samitsu could see quickly nodded agreement and twittered with laughter and said, "Oh, right you are, Mistress Beldair," in a particularly sycophantic way. Servants had their own hierarchies, as rigidly maintained as the Tower itself.

"But that sort of thing really is not for us to be gossiping over, Master Ledar," the stout woman went on. "Aes Sedai business, that is, and not for the likes of you and me. Tell us more about the Borderlands. Have you really seen Trollocs?"

"Aes Sedai," a man muttered. Hidden by the crowd around the table, he had to be Ledar's companion. Samitsu could see no grown men among the kitchen-folk this morning. "Tell me, do you really think they bonded those men you were talking about, those Asha'man? As Warders? And what about the one who died? You never said how."

"Why, it was the Dragon Reborn as killed him," Eldrid piped up. "And what else would Aes Sedai bond a man as? Oh, terrible, they was, them Asha'man. Turn you to stone with a look, they could. You can tell one just by looking at him, you know. Frightful glowing eyes, they have."

"Be quiet, Eldrid," Mistress Beldair said firmly. "Maybe they was Asha'man and maybe not, Master Underhill. Maybe they was bonded and maybe not. All I or anyone else can say is they was with *him*," the emphasis in her voice made plain who she was talking about; Eldrid might con-

sider Rand al'Thor fearful, but this woman did not want to so much as name him," and soon after *he* left, suddenly the Aes Sedai was telling them what to do and they was doing it. Of course, any fool knows to do as an Aes Sedai says. Anyway, those fellows are all gone off, now. Why are you so interested in them, Master Underhill? Is that an Andoran name?"

Ledar threw back his head and laughed, a booming sound that filled the room. His ears twitched violently. "Oh, we want to know everything about the places we visit, Mistress Beldair. The Borderlands, you say? You might think it's cold here, but we've seen trees crack open like nuts on the fire from the cold in the Borderlands. You have blocks of ice in the river, floating down from upstream, but we've seen rivers as wide as the Alguenya frozen so merchants can drive loaded trains of wagons across them, and men fishing through holes cut in ice nearly a span thick. At night, there are sheets of light in the sky that seem to crackle, bright enough to dim the stars, and . . ."

Even Mistress Beldair was leaning toward the Ogier, caught up, but one of the young scullions, too short to see past the adults, glanced behind him, and his eyes went wide when they lit on Samitsu and Sashalle. His gaze stayed fixed on them as if trapped, but he fumbled with one hand till he could tug at Mistress Beldair's sleeve. The first time, she shook him off without looking around. At a second tug, she turned her head with a scowl that vanished in a blink when she, too, saw the Aes Sedai.

"Grace favor you, Aes Sedai," she said, hastily tucking stray hair back under her cap as she bobbed her curtsy. "How may I serve you?" Ledar broke off short in mid-sentence, and his ears stiffened for a moment. He did not look toward the doorway.

"We wish to speak with your visitors," Sashalle said, moving into the kitchen. "We won't disrupt your kitchen for long."

"Of course, Aes Sedai." If the stout woman felt any surprise at two sisters wanting to talk to kitchen visitors, she showed none. Head swinging from side to side to take in everyone, she clapped her plump hands and began spouting orders. "Eldrid, those turnips will never peel themselves. Who was watching the fig sauce? Dried figs are hard to come by! Where is your basting spoon, Kasi? Andil, run fetch some . . ." Cooks and scullions scattered in every direction, and a clatter of pots and spoons quickly filled the kitchen, though everyone was plainly making an effort to be as quiet as possible so as not to disturb the Aes Sedai. They were plainly making an effort not to even look in their direction, though that involved some contortion.

The Ogier rose to his feet smoothly, his head coming near the thick ceiling beams. His clothing was what Samitsu remembered from meeting Ogier before, a long dark coat that flared over turned-down boots. Stains on his coat said he had been traveling hard; Ogier were a fastidious people. He only half turned to face her and Sashalle even as he made a bow, and he rubbed at his wide nose as if it itched,

partially hiding his broad face, but he appeared young, for an Ogier. "Forgive us, Aes Sedai," he murmured, "but we really must be moving on." Bending to gather a huge leather srip that had a large rolled blanket tied across the top and showed the impressions of several square shapes packed around whatever else was stuffed inside, he hoisted the broad strap over one shoulder. His capacious coat pockets bulged with angular shapes, too. "We have a long way to go before nightfall." His companion remained seated, though, his hands spread on the tabletop, a pale-haired young man with a week's growth of beard who seemed to have slept more than one night in his rumpled brown coat. He watched the Aes Sedai warily, with dark eyes that belonged on a cornered fox.

"Where are you going that you can reach by nightfall?" Sashalle did not stop until she was standing in front of the young Ogier, close enough to need to crane her neck to look up at him, though she made it seem graceful rather than awkward, as it should have been. "Are you on your way to the meeting we've heard about, in *Stedding Shangtai*? Master . . . Ledar, is it?"

His tall ears twitched violently, then were still, and his teacup-sized eyes narrowed almost as warily as the young man's, till the dangling ends of his eyebrows trailed onto his cheeks. "Ledar, son of Shandin son of Koimal, Aes Sedai," he said reluctantly. "But I'm certainly not going to the Grand Stump. Why, the Elders wouldn't let me close enough to hear what was being said." He gave a deep bass chuckle

that sounded forced. "We can't get where we're going tonight, Aes Sedai, but every league behind us is a league we don't have to walk tomorrow. We need to be on our way." The unshaven young man stood up, running a hand nervously along the long hilt of the sword belted at his waist, yet he made no move to pick up the scrip and blanket-roll at his feet and follow as the Ogier started toward the door that led to the street, even when the Ogier said over his shoulder, "We need to go now, Karlidin."

Sashalle glided fluidly into the Ogier's path, though she had to take three strides to his one. "You were asking after work as a mason, Master Ledar," she said in tones brooking no nonsense, "but your hands are not as callused as any mason's I've ever seen. It would be best for you to answer my questions."

Suppressing a triumphant smile, Samitsu moved up beside the Red sister. So Sashalle thought she could simply push her aside and ferret out what was going on, did she? The woman was in for a surprise. "You really must stay a while longer," she said to the Ogier in a low voice; the noise in the kitchen should keep anyone from overhearing, yet there was no need to take chances. "When I came to the Sun Palace, I had already heard of a young Ogier, a friend of Rand al'Thor. He left Cairhien some months past, in company with a young man named Karlidin. Isn't that right, Loial?" The Ogier's ears wilted.

The young man bit off a coarse curse he should have known better than to mouth in front of sisters. "I leave

when I want to leave, Aes Sedai," he said harshly, but in a low voice. For the most part, he divided his gaze between her and Sashalle, yet he was watchful for any of the kitchen workers who might come near. He did not wish to be overheard, either. "Before I do, I want some answers. What happened to . . . my friends? And *him*. Did he go mad?"

Loial sighed heavily, and made a pacifying gesture with one huge hand. "Be easy, Karlidin," he murmured. "Rand wouldn't like you starting trouble with Aes Sedai. Be easy." Karlidin's scowl only deepened.

Abruptly it occurred to Samitsu that she could have handled this better. Those were not the eyes of a cornered fox, but a wolf. She had grown too accustomed to Damer and Jahar and Eben, safely bonded and tamed. That might be an overstatement, though Merise was making an effort with Jahar—that was Merise's way—yet it seemed the horror of yesterday could become the complacency of today after long enough exposure. Karlidin Manfor was an Asha'man, too, and neither bonded nor tame. Was he embracing the male half of the Power? She almost laughed. Did birds fly?

Sashalle was watching the young man with a studying frown, her hands much too still on her skirts, but Samitsu was glad not to see the light of *saidar* around her. Asha'man could feel when a woman held the Power, and that might make him act . . . precipitately. Certainly she and Samitsu together could handle him—could they, if he already held the Power? Of course, they could. Of course!—but it would be much better if they did not have to.

Sashalle certainly was making no move to take charge, now, so Samitsu laid a hand lightly on his left arm. Through his coatsleeve, it felt like a bar of iron. So he was as uneasy as she. As uneasy as she? Light, but Damer and those other two had spoiled all her instincts!

"He seemed sane as most men when I last saw him," she said softly, with just a slight emphasis. None of the kitchen-folk were nearby, but a few had begun sneaking peeks toward the table. Loial exhaled heavily in relief, a sound like wind rushing across the mouth of a cave, but she kept her attention on Karlidin. "I don't know where he is, but he was alive as of a few days ago." Alanna had been close-mouthed as a mussel beyond that, and over-bearing, too, with Cadsuane's note in her fist. "Fedwin Morr died of poison, I fear, but I have no idea who gave it to him." To her surprise, Karlidin merely shook his head, with a rueful grimace, and muttered something incomprehensible about wine. "As for the others, they became Warders of their own free will." As much as any man did anything of his free will. Her Roshan certainly had not wanted to be a Warder, until she decided she wanted him for one. Even a woman who was not Aes Sedai could usually make a man decide the way she wanted. "They thought it a better choice, safer, than returning to . . . the others like you. You see, the damage here was done with *saidin*. You understand who must have been behind it? It was an attempt to kill the one whose sanity you fear for."

That did not seem to surprise him, either. What sort of men *were* these Asha'man? Was their so-called Black

Tower a murder-pit? The tightness went out of his arm, though, and suddenly he was just a road-weary young man who needed to shave. "Light!" he breathed. "What do we do now, Loial? Where do we go?"

"I . . . don't know," Loial replied, his shoulders sagging tiredly and his long ears drooping. "I . . . We have to find him, Karlidin. Somehow. We can't give up now. We have to let him know we did what he asked. As much as we could."

And what was it al'Thor had asked, Samitsu wondered. With a little luck, she could learn a great deal from these two. A tired man, or Ogier, feeling lost and alone, was ripe for answering questions.

Karlidin gave a small jump, his hand tightening on his swordhilt, and she bit back a curse of her own as a palace serving woman came running into the room with her skirts gathered almost to her knees. "Lord Dobraine's been murdered!" the serving woman squealed. "We will all be killed in our beds! My eyes have seen the dead walking, old Maringil himself, and my Mam says spirits will kill you if there has been a murder done! They—!" Her mouth froze open when she caught the presence of Aes Sedai, and she skidded to a halt still clutching her skirts. The kitchen folk seemed frozen, too, all watching the Aes Sedai from the corners of their eyes to see what they would do.

"Not Dobraine," Loial moaned, ears lying flat against his head. "Not him." He looked as much angry as saddened, his face stony. Samitsu did not think she had ever seen an Ogier angry.

"What is your name?" Sashalle demanded of the serving woman before Samitsu could even part her lips. "How do you know he was murdered? How do you know he's dead?"

The woman swallowed, her eyes held by Sashalle's cool gaze. "Cera, Aes Sedai?" she said hesitantly, bending her knees in a curtsy and only then realizing that she still had her skirts gathered up. Hastily smoothing them down only seemed to fluster her more. "Cera Doinal? They say . . . Everybody says Lord Dobraine is . . . I mean, he was . . . I mean . . ." She swallowed again, hard. "They all say his rooms are covered with blood. He was found lying in a great pool of it. With his head cut off, they say."

"They say a great many things," Sashalle said grimly, "and usually they're wrong. Samitsu, you will come with me. If Lord Dobraine *has* been injured, you may be able to do something for him. Loial, Karldin, you come, too. I don't want you out of my sight before I have a chance to ask a few questions."

"Burn your questions!" the young Asha'man growled, shouldering his belongings. "I'm leaving!"

"No, Karldin," Loial said gently, laying a huge hand on his companion's shoulder. "We can't go before we know about Dobraine. He's a friend, Rand's friend, and mine. We can't. Anyway, where are we hurrying to?" Karldin looked away. He had no answer.

Samitsu squeezed her eyes shut, and took a deep breath, but there was no help for it. She found herself following Sashalle out of the kitchens, once more hurrying to keep

up with the other woman's quick, gliding stride. In fact, she found herself half-running; Sashalle set an even more rapid pace than before.

The babbling of voices rose behind them as soon as they were out the door. The kitchen folk probably all were pressing the serving woman for particulars, details she very likely would invent where her knowledge failed. Ten different versions of events would find their way out of that kitchen, if not as many as there were kitchen folk. Worst of all, ten different versions of events *in* the kitchen would find their way out, every one adding to the rumors Corgaide doubtless was already starting. She could hardly recall a day that had gone so badly for her, so suddenly, like slipping on one patch of ice only to find another under her feet, then another. Cadsuane would have her hide to make gloves after this!

At least Loial and Karldin trailed after Sashalle as well. Whatever she learned from them might still be put to advantage, a way to salvage something. Scurrying along at Sashalle's side, she studied them in brief glances over her shoulder. Taking short strides to keep from over-running the Aes Sedai, the Ogier was frowning in worry. Over Dobraine, very likely, but also perhaps over only completing his mysterious task "as well as he could"? That was a mystery she intended to solve. The young Asha'man had no difficulty keeping up, though he wore an expression of stubborn reluctance and his hand caressed his swordhilt. The danger in him did not lie in steel. He stared suspiciously at the

backs of the Aes Sedai ahead, once meeting Samitsu's glance with a dark glower. He had the sense to keep his mouth shut, though. She would have to find a way to pry it open later for more than snarling.

Sashalle never glanced behind to make sure the pair were following, but then, she had to hear the thud of the Ogier's boots on the floortiles. Her face was thoughtful, and Samitsu would have given a great deal to know what she was thinking. Sashalle might be oathsworn to Rand al'Thor, but what protection did that give to an Asha'man? She was Red, after all. *That* had not changed with her face. Light, this could be the worst patch of ice of all!

It was a long arduous climb from the kitchens to Lord Dobraine's apartments in the Tower of the Full Moon, which was usually set aside for visiting nobility of high rank, and all along the way, Samitsu saw the evidence that Cera had been far from the first to hear what the ever-anonymous *they* had to say. Rather than endless streams of servants flowing along the corridors, small excited knots stood whispering anxiously. At sight of the Aes Sedai, they sprang apart and scurried away. A handful did gape at seeing an Ogier striding through the palace, yet for the most part, they all but fled. The nobles that had been about before had all vanished, doubtless back to their own rooms to mull over what opportunities and hazards Dobraine's death afforded them. Whatever Sashalle thought, Samitsu no longer doubted. If Dobraine had been alive, his own servants would have put paid to the rumor already.

For further confirmation, the hallways outside Dobraine's rooms were crowded with ashen-faced servants, their sleeves ringed to the elbows in the blue-and-white of House Taborwin. Some wept, and others looked lost, their foundation stone pulled out from under them. At a word from Sashalle, they stood aside for the Aes Sedai, moving drunkenly or mechanically. Dazed eyes swept by the Ogier without actually registering what they saw. Few remembered to make even halfhearted courtesies.

Inside, the anteroom was almost as full of Dobraine's servants, most staring as if poleaxed. Dobraine himself lay motionless on a litter in the middle of the large room, his head still attached to his body but his eyes closed and a drying sheet of blood, from a long cut in his scalp, spread across his still features. A dark trickle had leaked from his slack mouth. Two serving men with tears streaming down their cheeks paused in the act of laying a white cloth over his face at the entrance of the Aes Sedai. Dobraine did not appear to be breathing, and there were blood-stained gashes in the chest of his coat, with its thin stripes of color that marched down to his knees. Beside the litter, a dark blot larger than a man's body marred the green-and-yellow Tairen maze of the fringed carpet. Anyone who lost that much blood had to be dead. Two other men lay sprawled on the floor, one with death-glazed eyes gazing at the ceiling, the other on his side, an ivory knifehilt sticking up from his ribs where the blade had surely reached his heart. Short, pale-skinned Cairhienin, both wore the livery of palace ser-

vants, but a servant never carried the long, wooden-handled dagger that lay beside each corpse. A House Taborwin man, his foot drawn back to kick one of the corpses, hesitated on seeing the two sisters, then planted his boot hard in the dead man's ribs anyway. Clearly, proper decorum lay far from anyone's mind at the moment.

"Move that cloth out of the way," Sashalle told the men by the litter. "Samitsu, see whether you can still help Lord Dobraine."

Whatever she believed, instinct had moved Samitsu toward Dobraine, but that command—it was *dearly* a command!—put a stutter in her step. Gritting her teeth, she kept moving, and knelt carefully beside the litter, on the side away from the still damp blot, to put her hands on Dobraine's blood-soaked head. She never minded getting blood on her hands, but bloodstains were impossible to get out of silk unless you channeled, and she still felt a pang of guilt at the waste when she used the Power for something so mundane.

The necessary weaves were second nature to her, so much so that she embraced the Source and delved the Cairhienin lord without a thought. And blinked in surprise. Instinct had made her go ahead, though she had been certain there were three corpses in the room, yet life still flickered in Dobraine. A tiny guttering flame that the shock of Healing might well extinguish. The shock of the Healing she knew.

Her eyes searched out the pale-haired Asha'man. He was crouched beside one of the dead servants, calmly

searching the man, oblivious to the shocked stares of the living servants. One of the women suddenly noticed Loial, standing just inside the door, and goggled as if he had leapt out of thin air. With his arms folded across his chest and a grim expression on his broad face, the Ogier looked as though he were standing guard.

"Karlidin, do you know the kind of Healing that Damer Flinn uses?" Samatsu asked. "The kind that uses all of the Five Powers?"

He paused for a moment, frowning at her. "Flinn? I don't even know what you're talking about. I don't have much Talent for Healing, anyway." Eyeing Dobraine, he added, "He looks dead to me, but I hope you can save him. He was at the Wells." And he bent back to rummaging through the dead servant's coat.

Samitsu licked her lips. The thrill of being filled with *saidar* always seemed diminished to her, in situations like this. Situations when all of her possible choices were bad. Carefully, she gathered flows of Air, Spirit and Water, weaving them just so, the basic weave of Healing that every sister knew. No one in living memory had the Talent for Healing as strongly as she, and most sisters were limited in what they could Heal, some to little more than bruises. By herself, she could Heal almost as well as a linked circle. Most sisters could not regulate the weave to any degree at all; most did not even try to learn. She had been able to from the start. Oh, she could not Heal one particular thing and leave everything else as it was, the way Damer could; what

she did would affect everything from the stab wounds to the stuffed nose Dobraine was also suffering from. Delving had told her everything that ailed him. But she could wash away the worst injuries as if they had never been, or Heal so whoever she Healed appeared to have spent days recovering on her own, or anything in between. Each took no less of her strength, but they did require less from the patient. The smaller the amount of change in the body, the smaller the amount of the body's strength it drained. Only, except for the gash in his scalp, Dobraine's wounds were all serious, four deep punctures in his lungs, two of them gashing the heart as well. The strongest Healing would kill him before his wounds finished closing, while the weakest would revive him long enough to drown in his own blood. She had to choose somewhere in the middle and hope that she was right.

I am the best that ever has been, she thought firmly. Cadsuane had told her that. *I am the best!* Altering the weave slightly, she let it sink into the motionless man.

Some of the servants cried out in alarm as Dobraine's body convulsed. He half sat up, deep-set eyes opening wide, long enough for what sounded all too much like a long death rattle to rush out of his mouth. Then his eyes rolled back in his head, and he slipped from her grasp, thudding back down onto the litter. Hastily, she readjusted the weave and delved him again, holding her breath. He lived. By a hair, and so weak he might yet die, but it would not be those stabs that killed him, except indirectly. Even through

the drying blood that matted his hair, shaven away from his forehead, she could see the puckered pink line of a fresh, tender scar across his scalp. He would have the same beneath his coat, and he might be troubled by shortness of breath when he exerted himself, if he pulled through, yet for the moment, he did live, and that was all that mattered. For the moment. There was still the matter of who had wanted him dead, and why.

Releasing the Power, she stood unsteadily. *Saidar* draining out of her always made her feel tired. One of the serving men, gaping, hesitantly handed her the cloth he had been going to lay on his lord's face, and she used it to wipe her hands. "Take him to his bed," she said. "Get as much mild honey-water down him as you can. He needs to gain strength quickly. And find a Wise Woman . . . a Reader? Yes, a Reader. He will need her, too." He was out of her hands, now, and herbs might help. At least, they were unlikely to harm, coming from a Reader, and at worst the woman would make sure they gave him enough honey-water and not too much.

With much bowing and many murmurs of thanks, four of the serving men took up the litter and carried Dobraine deeper into the apartments. Most of the other servants followed hurriedly, wearing expressions of relief, and the rest dashed out into the corridor. An instant later, glad shouts and cheers broke out, and she heard her name nearly as often as Dobraine's. Very gratifying. It would have been more satisfying if Sashalle had not smiled and given her an

approving nod. Approving! And why not a pat on the head, while she was about it?

Karldin had paid no mind at all to the Healing, insofar as Samitsu had noticed. Finishing his search of the second corpse, he rose and crossed the room to Loial, attempting to show the Ogier something, shielded by his body, without letting the Aes Sedai notice. Loial plucked it—a sheet of cream-colored paper, creased from folding—out of the Asháman's hand and held it up in front of his face opened out in his thick fingers, ignoring Karldin's scowl.

"But this makes no sense," the Ogier muttered, frowning as he read. "No sense at all. Unless—!" He cut off abruptly, long ears flickering, and exchanged a tense look with the pale-haired fellow, who gave a curt nod. "Oh, this is very bad," Loial said. "If there were more than two, Karldin, if they found—!" He choked off his words again at a frantic headshake from the young man.

"I will see that, please," Sashalle said, holding out her hand, and please or no please, it was not a request.

Karldin attempted to snatch the paper from Loial's hand, but the Ogier calmly handed it to Sashalle, who inspected it without any change of expression, then handed it to Samitsu. It was thick paper, smooth and expensive, and new-looking. Samitsu had to control her eyebrows' desire to climb as she read.

At my command, the bearers of this are to remove certain items, which they will know, from my apart-

ments and take them out of the Sun Palace. Make them private of my rooms, give them whatever aid they require and keep silent on this matter, in the name of the Dragon Reborn and on pain of his displeasure.

Dobraine Taborwin

She had seen Dobraine's writing often enough to recognize the rounded hand as his. "Obviously, someone employs a very good forger," she said, earning a quick, contemptuous glance from Sashalle.

"It did seem unlikely he wrote it himself and was stabbed by his own men in mistake," the Red said in cutting tones. Her gaze swung to Loial and the Asha'man. "What is it they might have found?" she demanded. "What is it you are *afraid* they found?" Karldrin stared back at her blandly.

"I just meant whatever they were looking for," Loial answered. "They had to be here to steal something." But his tufted ears twitched so hard they almost vibrated before he could master them. Most Ogier made very poor liars, at least while young.

Sashalle's ringlets swung as she shook her head deliberately. "What you know is important. The pair of you are not leaving until I know it, too."

"And how are you going to stop us?" The very quietness of Karlidin's words made them more dangerous. He met Sashalle's gaze levelly, as if he had not a worry in the world. Oh, yes; very much a wolf, not a fox.

GLIMMERS: The Prologue to CROSSROADS OF TWILIGHT

"I thought I'd never find you," Rosara Medrano announced, marching into that moment of perilous silence still wearing her red gloves and fur-lined cloak, with the hood thrown back to reveal the carved ivory combs in her black hair. There were damp patches on the shoulders of the cloak from melted snow. A tall woman, as brown as a sun-dark Aiel, she had gone out at first light to try finding spices for some sort of fish stew from her native Tear. She spared only the briefest glance for Loial and Karldin, and did not waste a moment inquiring after Dobraine. "A party of sisters has entered the city, Samitsu. I rode like a madwoman to get here ahead of them, but they could be riding in at this moment. There are Asha'man with them, and one of the Asha'man is Logain!"

Karldin barked a rough laugh, and suddenly Samitsu wondered whether she was going to live long enough for Cadsuane to have her hide.

AN INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT JORDAN

The following interview with the author is based on questions submitted by Robert Jordan fans.

Our thanks to the two following fan sites for collecting the questions:

www.wotmania.com and www.dragonmount.com

1: What advice would you give Rand concerning his relationship with Aviendha, Min, and Elayne?

RJ: Step very carefully. It's hard enough for a man to deal with one woman at a time, since we aren't really equipped mentally to keep up without a lot of effort. A man could get trampled very easily trying to keep up with three, not least because they have their own relationship with one another, and no matter what he does, he will not ever in a million years be able to understand

GLIMMERS: The Prologue to CROSSROADS OF TWILIGHT

that, or be able to avoid cutting his own throat on it. Luckily for him, I do, and I can. For him, anyway.

2: Is there any scene in *The Wheel of Time* that was particularly difficult to write? Why? Are you satisfied with how it came out?

RJ: Too many scenes were difficult to write for me to list them. There's seldom any warning which they will be; I have begun scenes that I was sure would be difficult only to have them roll out like a carpet, while other scenes, I've thought would be a snap only to have to carve them out of stone with my teeth. As to why, now. . . . If I knew why, then they probably wouldn't be difficult, now would they? The strange thing is that the scenes which were difficult often turn out to be the best. So Harriet says, anyway. At least a dozen times I've told her that I needed to work more on a particular scene only to have her tell me that it was some of the most beautiful writing in the book and I mustn't touch it.

3: Did you see *The Lord of the Rings* movie? What did you think of it? What is your favorite fantasy movie?

RJ: Oh, yes; Harriet and I only waited long enough for the crowds to thin out a little before we went. After all, we both read the books the first time back when they first became available in the United States, and I myself have re-read them perhaps a dozen times since. I thought the movie was most excellent! It is well-crafted

and well-acted, it follows the books to a fair degree, and the changes, for the most part, were necessary to fit it into a reasonable length for a movie. Making Arwen more prominent was necessary, too, since she is barely there in the book, but at least they resisted the temptation to make her a sword-babe, though it appears that took quite an effort. At the moment, I would have to say that my favorite fantasy movies are *Fellowship of the Ring* and *Excalibur*, an old film about King Arthur. Rent it some time and take a look.

- 4: What is your favorite scene to this point in the books? Are there any scenes that you like to go back to and re-read, because you like them so much?

RJ: My favorite scene, like my favorite character, is always the one I am working on at the moment. Once I am done with a scene—and I'll admit that can take some time—I don't go back to read it unless I want to check on exactly how I worded something. (The exact wording can turn out to be crucial, later on.) I don't think my ego is particularly mild—*abem!*—but I certainly don't sit around reading what I have written for the enjoyment of it. I mean, I *wrote* the bloody thing! I *know* what's going to happen and why!

- 5: What in any of the books do you wish you could change?

RJ: I would change a great deal, and at the same time,

nothing. I would change nothing because (1) I am satisfied with the story, since it is running exactly the way I want, if a bit longer, and the characters are developing exactly as planned, and (2) once I am finished with a book, I don't spend any time worrying over what I could have done differently. I'm *finished* with it and put it out of my head, by and large. There's a new book that has my attention, now. And I would change a great deal because I'm never satisfied with the writing itself, with the flow of words. I always believe I can do it better. Just have to run through it one more time, and maybe one more after that, and maybe. . . . If it weren't for deadlines, and Harriet doing her patented "editorial vulture perched on the back of the writer's chair" imitation (with apologies to Charles Schulz), I suppose I could keep re-writing the same book for five years. Maybe ten.

6: After *Crossroads of Twilight* is published, how many more books will there be in The Wheel of Time series? Will there be another spinoff series or another completely unrelated fantasy series?

RJ: After *Crossroads of Twilight*, there will be two more books, knock wood, God willing and the creek don't rise. I never intended The Wheel of Time to be this long. The story is progressing the way I planned, but from the beginning I believed I could tell it in many fewer words, many fewer volumes. When I finish Wheel, I have no

plans for spin-offs or sequels. I intend to go on to something new. My plans are for another fantasy series, though shorter than *Wheel*, it is to be hoped. It will be set in a different world with different cultures and different problems, though it will be in many ways another story of the clash of cultures, cultures undergoing change. And I suppose the difficulties that men and women have understanding one another will play a part, large or small, since they have done so in every book I've ever written, with one exception. My editor—Harriet, for those who don't already know—also says that it will be a chance for people to see inside the Seanchan Empire. It won't be the Seanchan Empire, of course, but it will be the same sort of stratified, hierarchal culture, even more so than Seanchan.

7: As your editor, how much influence does your wife Harriet have over the final draft of each book? Do you collaborate on the plot elements before each book is written?

RJ: As my editor, Harriet has a great deal of influence over the final draft of each book. She is my editor, after all. She is the one who says things like, "You can do better here" and "You didn't convince me here." But no, we don't collaborate on plot elements. Occasionally I will hash over a scene with her, or check with her to see whether I have had a female character react in a way that she, as a woman, will believe that a woman would

GLIMMERS: The Prologue to CROSSROADS OF TWILIGHT

react, but she would no sooner put her nose into trying to lay out my story than I would stick mine into trying to set up her poems. We've never come to divorce—at least, I haven't; I can't say about her—and we both think it best to keep clear of motives for murder.

8: How does your knowledge of physics influence your idea of channeling and the Talents involved in the books, such as *Traveling*, *Skimming*, etc? Do you have other hobbies or talents that influence your writing?

RJ: My knowledge of physics influenced channeling to the extent that I have attempted to treat channeling as if it were a form of science and engineering rather than magic. You might say that the Laws of Thermodynamics apply in altered form. I expect that my reading in history has influenced the books more than my knowledge of physics or engineering. I have not tried to copy any actual historical culture or period, but a knowledge of the way things actually were done at various times has helped shape my vision of the world of *The Wheel*, as has the study of cultures meeting that are strange to one another, and cultures undergoing change, willingly or, as is more often the case, unwillingly. I used to spend summers working on my grandfather's farm, a very old-fashioned set-up even then, so I have some feel for country life, and I like to hunt and fish, and spent a good part of my growing up in the woods or on the water, so I have a fair feel for the out-

doors and the forests, which also helps. And of course, I can use a little of my Vietnam experience. Not for setting out the actual battles, but because I know first-hand the confusion of battle and what it is like to try to maintain some semblance of order while all around you random events are pushing everything toward chaos.

9: Do you feel that fantasy literature is heading in a more feminist direction? If so, what role has *The Wheel of Time* series played in that? Did you consciously focus on creating strong female characters? Who do you think is your strongest female character? Who is your favorite female character?

RJ: Whether or not fantasy is becoming more feminist, I couldn't say. If it is, I certainly don't know whether *The Wheel* has played any part. There have been fantasies based at least in part on the feminist struggle for many years, long before I began writing these books. In fact, I have been accused of ignoring the feminist struggle, though that isn't exactly true. I simply decided to write in a world where the feminist struggle occurred so long ago that no one even remembers it. People in this world may think that a woman acting as a guard on a merchant's train of wagons is odd, but just because it's a rare sight. (When weapons depend on upper body strength, as swords, spears, halberds and bows do, the people who end up wielding the weapons are usually

those with the greatest upper body strength.) But if a merchant or a magistrate or a dock worker is a woman, that's just part of the description. I mean, the most powerful single group in this world for the last three thousand plus years is all-female. The Aes Sedai are actually the most sexist bunch in town, in many ways. In the eyes of most of them, a Warder is a man. The very notion of a female strikes them as peculiar and even uneasy-making. Which might just be the remnants of knowledge of what the differences are between a bond that links a man and a woman and the bond that links two women. (RAFO, guys, though the clues are already there. And by the by, a bond linking two men is also different, just not different in the same way.)

- 10: Do other authors offer you advice or suggestions on how to write your books?
- RJ: I'm not quite sure what I would say to another writer who offered me suggestions on how to write my books. When you are first starting out, you try to learn from other people, but once you get to a certain point, learning becomes more a matter of honing your own skills, and your confidence has usually advanced by this time to the point where you no longer seek the advice of others. (HEADLINE: Mark McGwire attacks Barry Bonds with baseball bat after Bonds offers advice on swing.)

GLIMMERS: The Prologue to CROSSROADS OF TWILIGHT

- 11: What other authors have most influenced your work?
RJ: Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, Robert Heinlein, John D. McDonald and Louis L'Amour.
- 12: Are any of your characters or cultures designed to pay specific homage to any particular work or author?
RJ: No. In the first chapters of *The Eye of the World*, I tried for a Tolkienesque feel without trying to copy Tolkien's style, but that was by way of saying to the reader, okay, this is familiar, this is something you recognize, now let's go where you haven't been before. I like taking a familiar theme, something people think they know and know where it must be heading, then standing it on its ear or giving it a twist that subverts what you thought you knew. I must admit that I occasionally drop in a reference—for example, there's an inn called The Nine Rings, and Loial is seen reading a book entitled *To Sail Beyond the Sunset*—but it isn't a regular thing by any means.
- 13: Are all of Mat's memories from his past lives?
RJ: No, Mat's "old" memories are not from his past lives at all. The "sickness" he got from the Shadar Logoth dagger resulted in holes in his memory. He found whole stretches of his life that seemed to be missing. When he passed through the "doorframe" *ter'angreal* in Rhuidean, one of the things he said—not knowing that the rules here were different than in the other *ter'angreal* he had

used—was that he wanted the holes in his memory filled up, meaning that he wanted to recover his own memories. In this place, however, it was not a matter of asking questions and receiving answers, but of striking bargains for *what you want*. What he received for that particular demand was memories gathered by the people on that side of the *ter'angreal*, memories from many men, all long dead, from many cultures. And since not everyone passing by has the nerve to journey through a *ter'angreal* to some other world, the memories he received were those of adventurers and soldiers and men of daring.

- 14: Are there wolfsisters? Could an Ogier become a wolf-brother/sister?
- RJ: There are no known wolfsisters so far, but there is no reason there couldn't be a wolfsister. Ogier, however, cannot become linked to wolves in this way. Their's is a different way than that of humankind.
- 15: In the scene during which the taint is cleansed, Cadsuane uses a *ter'angreal* that detects the One Power being channeled and the direction it is coming from. She watches the *ter'angreal*, and when the enemy channels, she points, and someone attacks. Why doesn't it point to the huge amounts of the One Power that Rand and Nynaeve are channeling—far more than the Forsaken are being pegged for?

RJ: Cadsuane's *ter'angreal* was made during the Breaking of the World, at a time when men and women no longer linked, or at least very rarely, since male channelers were going mad at a rate of knots. What the maker was particularly interested in detecting was men channeling, but a man channeling in combination with a woman was, by definition, safe, because no woman was going to link with a man unless she knew absolutely that he was sane and not going to go over the edge into insanity while they were linked. Thus, *saidin* and *saidar* being worked in combination could be ignored, and in fact would be a distraction, since this was and is a warning device. Cadsuane's *ter'angreal* won't point to the two halves of the Power being wielded in combination.

16: Does *ta'veren*-ness ebb and flow as needed? If Rand, Mat and Perrin were all *ta'veren* growing up, it seems that the Two Rivers would have had a lot of odd events occurring, but no mention is made of it.

RJ: You might say that *ta'veren*-ness ebbs and flows. For one thing, remember that even for someone like Rand, the effects are really occasional, not continuous. Even when he is causing dozens of coincidences in a particular place, many more events pass off quite normally. For another thing, no one is born *ta'veren*. Rand, Mat and Perrin only became *ta'veren* just before Moiraine appeared. You become *ta'veren* according to the needs of the Wheel. Like the heroes linked to the Wheel,

who are spun out as needed to try to keep the weaving of the Pattern straight, a man or woman becomes *tá'veren* because the Wheel has “decided” to use them as an influence on the Pattern. And, no, the Wheel isn’t sentient. Think more of a fuzzy logic device that uses feedback to correct what it is doing in order to do it in the most efficient way.


- 17: Rhuarc indicates that an Aiel in Rhuidean sees the past through the eyes of one his ancestors. Is this true for the women as well? What would a non-Aiel see, if anything?
- RJ: Yes, a woman would also see through the eyes of her ancestors, at least in the “forest of crystal spires” *ter’angreal*, and she, too, would live the history of the Aiel, in effect. Someone who wasn’t Aiel could wander through those spires forever and never see a thing except the spires. He or she might think it was a monument, or maybe a work of art. Just for a reminder, women who are chosen out to be Wise Ones have to go to Rhuidean twice, the second time for the spires and the first for another *ter’angreal*, one that makes her see all of the possible paths her life could take all the way to their conclusion. She can’t possibly remember all of them, of course, but some things she will remember and know that it would be very bad for her to make that particular choice when it comes, or alternatively, very good. This is the *ter’angreal* that Moiraine went through.

GLIMMERS: The Prologue to CROSSROADS OF TWILIGHT

- 18: Why don't the Forsaken ever just open a gateway for floods of Trollocs to pour through, instead of messing with the dangers of the Ways?
- RJ: RAFO, my child. RAFO.

About the Author

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