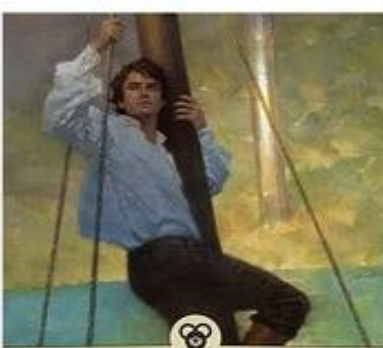




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THE EYE OF THE WORLD

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THE GREAT HUNT

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THE DRAGON REBORN

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THE FIRES OF HEAVEN

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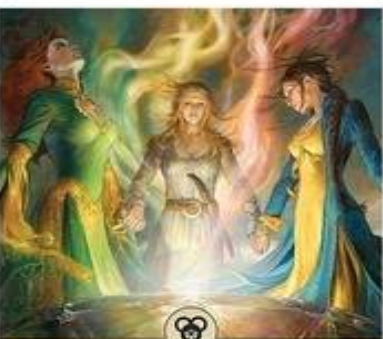
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A CROWN OF SWORDS

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THE PATH OF DAGGERS

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NEW SPRING

THE WHEEL OF TIME® · IN THE BEGINNING

ROBERT  
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For Harriet  
Now and forever

# Contents

- [1 The Hook](#)
- [2 A Wish Fulfilled](#)
- [3 Practice](#)
- [4 Leaving the Tower](#)
- [5 The Human Heart](#)
- [6 Surprises](#)
- [7 The Itch](#)
- [8 Shreds of Serenity](#)
- [9 It Begins](#)
- [10 It Finishes](#)
- [11 Just Before Dawn](#)
- [12 Entering Home](#)
- [13 Business in the City](#)
- [14 Changes](#)
- [15 Into Canluum](#)
- [16 The Deepes](#)
- [17 An Arrival](#)
- [18 A Narrow Passage](#)
- [19 Pond Water](#)
- [20 Breakfast in Manala](#)
- [21 Some Tricks of the Power](#)
- [22 Keeping Custom](#)
- [23 The Evening Star](#)
- [24 Making Use of Invisibility](#)
- [25 An Answer](#)
- [26 When to Surrender](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

[About the Author](#)

# Chapter

## 1

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### *The Hook*

A cold wind gusted through the night, across the snow-covered land where men had been killing one another for the past three days. The air was crisp, if not so icy as Lan expected for this time of year. It was still cold enough for his steel breastplate to carry the chill through his coat, and his breath to mist in front of his face when the wind did not whip it away. The blackness in the sky was just beginning to fade, the thousands of stars like the thick-scattered dust of diamonds slowly dimming. The fat sickle of the moon hung low, giving barely light to make out the silhouettes of the men guarding the fireless camp in the sprawling copse of oak and leatherleaf. Fires would have given them away to the Aiel. He had fought the Aiel long before this war began, on the Shienaran marches, a matter of duty to friends. Aielmen were bad enough in daylight. Facing them in the night was as close to staking your life on the toss of a coin as made no difference. Of course, sometimes they found you without fires.

Resting a gauntleted hand on his sword in its scabbard, he pulled his cloak back around himself and continued his round of the sentries through calf-deep snow. It was an ancient sword, made with the One Power before the Breaking of the World, during the War of the Shadow, when the Dark One had touched the world for a time. Only legends remained of that Age, except perhaps for what the Aes Sedai might know, yet the blade was hard fact. It could not be broken and never needed sharpening. The hilt had been replaced countless times over the long centuries, but not even tarnish could touch the blade. Once, it had been the sword of Malkieri kings.

The next sentry he came to, a short stocky fellow in a long dark cloak, was leaning back against the trunk of a heavy-limbed oak, his head slumped on his chest. Lan touched the sentry's shoulder, and the man jerked upright, almost dropping the horn-and-sinew horsebow gripped in his gloved hands. The hood of his cloak slid back, revealing his conical steel helmet for an instant before he hastily pulled the cowl up again. In the pale moonlight, Lan could not make out the man's face behind the vertical bars of his faceguard, but he knew him. Lan's own helmet was open, in the style of dead Malkier, supporting a steel crescent moon above his forehead.

"I wasn't sleeping, my Lord," the fellow said quickly. "Just resting a moment." A copper-skinned Domani, he sounded embarrassed, and rightly so. This was not his first battle, or even his first war.

"An Aiel would have wakened you by slitting your throat or putting a spear through your heart, Basram," Lan said in a quiet voice. Men listened closer to calm tones than to the loudest shouts, so long as firmness and certainty accompanied the calm. "Maybe it would be better without the temptation of the tree so near." He refrained from adding that even if the Aiel did not kill him, the man risked frostbite standing in one place too long. Basram knew that. Winters were nearly as cold in Arad Doman as in the Borderlands.

Mumbling an apology, the Domani respectfully touched his helmet and moved three paces out from the tree. He held himself erect, now, and peered into the darkness. He shifted his feet, too, guarding against blackened toes. Rumor said Aes Sedai were offering Healing, closer to the river, injuries and sickness gone as if they had never been, but without that, amputation was the usual way to stop a man losing his feet to black-rot, and maybe his legs as well. In any case, it was best to avoid becoming involved with Aes Sedai more than absolutely necessary. Years later you could find one of them had tied strings to you just in case she might have need. Aes Sedai thought far ahead, and seldom seemed to care who they used in their schemes or how. That was one reason Lan avoided them.

How long would Basram's renewed alertness last? Lan wished he had the answer, but there was no point in taking the Domani to task further. All of the men he commanded were bone-weary. Likely every man in the army of the grandly named Great Coalition—sometimes it was called the Grand Coalition, or the Grand Alliance, or half a dozen other things, some worse than uncomplimentary—likely every last man was near exhaustion. A battle was hot work, snow or no snow, and tiring. Muscles could knot from tension even when they had the chance to stop for a time, and the last few days had offered small chance to stop very long.

The camp held well over three hundred men, a full quarter of them on guard at any given time—against Aiel, Lan wanted as many eyes as he could manage—and before he had gone another two hundred paces, he had had to wake three more, one asleep on his feet without any support at all. Jaim's head was up, and his eyes open. That was a trick some soldiers learned, especially old soldiers like Jaim. Cutting off the gray-bearded man's protests that he could not have been asleep, not standing up straight, Lan promised to let Jaim's friends know if he found him sleeping again.

Jaim's mouth hung open for a moment; then he swallowed hard. "Won't happen again, my Lord. The Light sear my soul if it does!" He sounded sincere to his bones. Some men would have been afraid that their friends would drub them senseless for putting the rest in danger, but given the company Jaim kept, more likely he dreaded the humiliation of having been caught.

As Lan walked on, he found himself chuckling. He seldom laughed, and it was a fool thing to laugh over, but laughter was better than worrying over what he could not change, such as weary men drowsing on guard. As well worry about death. What could not be changed must be endured.

Abruptly, he stopped and raised his voice. "Bukama, why are you sneaking about? You've been following me since I woke." A startled grunt came from behind him. Doubtless Bukama had thought he was being silent, and in truth, very few men would have heard the faint crunching of his boots in the snow, yet he should have known Lan would. After all, he had been one

of Lan's teachers, and one of the first lessons had been to be aware of his surroundings at all times, even in his sleep. Not an easy lesson for a boy to learn, but only the dead could afford oblivion. The oblivious soon became the dead, in the Blight beyond the Borderlands.

"I've been watching your back," Bukama announced gruffly, striding up to join him. "One of these black-veiled Aiel Darkfriends could sneak in and cut *your* throat for all the care you're taking. Have you forgotten everything I taught you?" Bluff and broad, Bukama was almost as tall as he, taller than most men, and wearing a Malkieri helmet without a crest, though he had the right to one. He had more concern for his duties than his rights, which was proper, but Lan wished he would not spurn his rights so completely.

When the nation of Malkier died, twenty men had been given the task of carrying the infant Lan Mandragoran to safety. Only five had survived that journey, to raise Lan from the cradle and train him, and Bukama was the last left alive. His hair was solid gray now, worn cut at the shoulder as tradition required, but his back was straight, his arms hard, his blue eyes clear and keen. Tradition infused Bukama. A thin braided leather cord held his hair back, resting in the permanent groove across his forehead it had made over the years. Few men still wore the *hadori*. Lan did. He would die wearing it, and go into the ground wearing that and nothing else. If there was anyone to bury him where he died. He glanced north, toward his distant home. Most people would have thought it a strange place to call home, but he had felt the pull of it ever since he came south.

"I remembered enough to hear you," he replied. There was too little light to make out Bukama's weathered face, yet he knew it wore a glower. He could not recall seeing any other expression from his friend and teacher even when he spoke praise. Bukama was steel clothed in flesh. Steel his will, duty his soul. "Do you still believe the Aiel are pledged to the Dark One?"

The other man made a sign to ward off evil, as if Lan had spoken the Dark One's true name. Shai'tan. They had both seen the misfortune that followed speaking that name aloud, and Bukama was one of those who believed that merely thinking it drew the Dark One's attention. *The Dark*



*One and all the Forsaken are bound in Shayol Ghul, Lan recited the catechism in his head, bound by the Creator at the moment of creation. May we shelter safe beneath the Light, in the Creator's hand.* He did not believe thinking that name was enough, but better safe than sorry when it came to the Shadow.

"If they aren't, then why are we here?" Bukama said sourly. And surprisingly. He liked to grumble, but always about inconsequential things or prospects for the future. Never the present.

"I gave my word to stay until the end," Lan replied mildly.

Bukama scrubbed at his nose. His grunt might have been abashed this time. It was hard to be sure. Another of his lessons had been that a man's word must be as good as an oath sworn beneath the Light or it was no good at all.

The Aiel had indeed seemed like a horde of Darkfriends when they suddenly spilled across the immense mountain range called the Spine of the World. They had burned the great city of Cairhien, ravaged the nation of Cairhien, and, in the two years since, had fought through Tear and then Andor before reaching these killing fields, outside the huge island city of Tar Valon. In all the years since the nations of the present day had been carved out of Artur Hawkwing's empire, the Aiel had never before left the desert called the Waste. They might have invaded before that; no one could be sure, except maybe the Aes Sedai in Tar Valon, but, as so often with the women of the White Tower, they were not saying. What Aes Sedai knew, they held close, and doled out by dribbles and drops when and if they chose. In the world outside of Tar Valon, though, many men had claimed to see a pattern. A thousand years had passed between the Breaking of the World and the Trolloc Wars, or so most historians said. Those wars had destroyed the nations that existed then, and no one doubted that the Dark One's hand had been behind them, imprisoned or not, as surely as it had been behind the War of the Shadow, and the Breaking, and the end of the Age of Legends. A thousand years from the Trolloc Wars until Hawkwing built an empire and that, too, was destroyed, after his death, in the War of the Hundred Years.

Some historians said they saw the Dark One's hand in that war, too. And now, close enough to a thousand years after Hawkwing's empire died, the Aiel came, burning and killing. It *had* to be a pattern. Surely the Dark One must have directed them. Lan would never have come south if he had not believed that. He no longer did. But he had given his word.

He wriggled his toes in his turned-down boots. Whether or not it was as cold as he was used to, iciness burrowed into your feet if you stood too long in one place in snow. "Let's walk," he said. "I don't doubt I'll have to wake a dozen more men if not two." And make another round to wake others.

Before they could take a step, however, a sound brought them up short, and alert: the sound of a horse walking in the snow. Lan's hand drifted to his sword hilt, half consciously easing the blade in its sheath. A faint rasp of steel on leather came from Bukama doing the same. Neither feared an attack; Aiel rode only at great need, and reluctantly even then. But a lone horseman at this hour had to be a messenger, and messengers rarely brought good news, these days. Especially not in the night.

Horse and rider materialized out of the darkness following a lean man afoot, one of the sentries by the horsebow he carried. The horse had the arched neck of good Tairen bloodstock, and the rider was plainly from Tear as well. For one thing, the scent of roses came ahead of him on the wind, from the oils glistening on his pointed beard, and only Tairens were fool enough to wear scent, as if the Aiel had no noses. Besides, no one else wore those helmets with a high ridge across the top and a rim that cast the man's narrow face in shadow. A single short white plume on the helmet marked him an officer, an odd choice for a messenger, albeit an officer of low rank. He huddled in his high-cantled saddle and held his dark cloak tightly around him. He seemed to be shivering. Tear lay far to the south. On the coast of Tear, it never snowed so much as a single flake. Lan had never quite believed that, whatever he had read, until he had seen it for himself.

"Here he is, my Lord," the sentry said in a hoarse voice. A grizzled Saldaean named Rakim, he had received that voice a year back, along with a ragged scar that he liked to show off when drinking, from an Aiel arrow in

the throat. Rakim considered himself lucky to be alive, and he was. Unfortunately, he also believed that having cheated death once, he would continue to do so. He took chances, and even when not drinking, he boasted about his luck, a fool thing to do. There was no point to taunting fate.

“Lord Mandragoran?” The rider drew rein in front of Lan and Bukama. Remaining in his saddle, he eyed them uncertainly, no doubt because their armor was unadorned, their coats and cloaks plain wool and somewhat worn. A little embroidery was a fine thing, but some southern men decked themselves out like tapestries. Likely under his cloak the Tairen wore a gilded breastplate and a silk satin coat striped in his house colors. His high boots were certainly embroidered in scrollwork that shone in the moonlight with the glitter of silver. In any case, the man went on with barely a pause for breath. “The Light burn my soul, I was sure you were the closest, but I was beginning to think I’d never find you. Lord Emares is following about five or six hundred Aiel with six hundred of his armsmen.” He shook his head slightly. “Odd thing is, they’re heading east. Away from the river. At any rate, the snow slows them as much as it does us, and Lord Emares thinks if you can place an anvil on that ridgeline they call the Hook, he can take them from behind with a hammer. Lord Emares doubts they can reach it before first light.”

Lan’s mouth tightened. Some of these southlanders had peculiar notions of polite behavior. Not dismounting before he spoke, not naming himself. As a guest, he should have named himself first. Now Lan could not without sounding boastful. The fellow had failed even to offer his lord’s compliments or good wishes. And he seemed to think they did not know that east would be away from the River Erinin. Perhaps that was just carelessness in speech, but the rest was rudeness. Bukama had not moved, yet Lan laid a hand on his sword-arm anyway. His oldest friend could be touchy.

The Hook lay a good league from the camp, and the night was failing, but he nodded. “Inform Lord Emares that I will be there by first light,” he told the horseman. The name Emares was unfamiliar, but the army was so large, near two hundred thousand men representing more than a dozen

nations, plus Tower Guards from Tar Valon and even a contingent of the Children of the Light, that it was impossible to know above a handful of names. “Bukama, rouse the men.”

Bukama grunted, savagely this time, and with a gesture for Rakim to follow, stalked away into the camp, his voice rising as he went. “Wake and saddle! We ride! Wake and saddle!”

“Ride hard,” the nameless Tairen said with at least a hint of command in his voice. “Lord Emares would regret riding against those Aiel without an anvil in place.” He seemed to be implying that Lan would regret this Emares’ regretting.

Lan formed the image of a flame in his mind and fed emotion into it, not anger alone but everything, every scrap, until it seemed that he floated in emptiness. After years of practice, achieving *ko’di*, the oneness, needed less than a heartbeat. Thought and his own body grew distant, but in this state he became one with the ground beneath his feet, one with the night, with the sword he would not use on this mannerless fool. “I said that I would be there,” he said levelly. “What I say, I do.” He no longer wished to know the man’s name.

The Tairen offered him a curt bow from his saddle, turned his horse, and booted the animal to a quick trot.

Lan held the *ko’di* a moment longer to be sure his emotions were firmly under control. It was beyond unwise to enter battle angry. Anger narrowed the vision and made for foolish choices. How had that fellow managed to stay alive this long? In the Borderlands, he would have sparked a dozen duels in a day. Only when Lan was sure that he was calm, almost as cool as if he were still wrapped in the oneness, did he turn. Summoning the Tairen’s shadowed face brought no anger with it. Good.

By the time he reached the center of the camp among the trees, it would have seemed a kicked ant-heap to most men. To one who knew, it was ordered activity, and almost silent. No wasted motion or breath. There were no tents to be struck, since pack animals would have been an encumbrance when it came to fighting. Some men were already on their horses,

breastplates buckled in place, helmets on their heads, and in their hands lances tipped with a foot or more of steel. Nearly all of the rest were tightening saddle girths or fastening leather-cased horsebows and full quivers behind the tall cantles of their saddles. The slow had died in the first year fighting the Aiel. Most now were Saldaeans and Kandori, the rest Domani. Some Malkieri had come south, but Lan would not lead them, not even here. Bukama rode with him, but he did not follow.

Bukama met him carrying a lance and leading his yellow roan gelding, Sun Lance, followed by a beardless youth named Caniedrin, who was carefully leading Lan's Cat Dancer. The bay stallion was only half-trained, but Caniedrin was well advised to take care. Even a half-trained warhorse was a formidable weapon. Of course, the Kandori was not as innocent as his fresh face suggested. An efficient and experienced soldier, an archer of rare skill, he was a cheerful killer who often laughed while he fought. He was smiling now, at the prospect of fighting to come. Cat Dancer tossed his head, also impatient.

Whatever Caniedrin's experience, Lan checked Cat Dancer's saddle girths carefully before taking the reins. A loose girth could kill as quickly as a spear-thrust.

"I told them what we're about this morning," Bukama muttered after Caniedrin had headed off to his own mount, "but with these Aiel, an anvil can turn into a pincushion if the hammer is slow in coming." He never grumbled in front of the men, just to Lan.

"And the hammer can become a pincushion if it strikes with no anvil in place," Lan replied, swinging into the saddle. The sky was plainly gray now. Still a dark gray, but only a scattered handful of stars remained. "We will have to ride hard to reach the Hook before first light." He raised his voice. "Mount!"

Ride hard they did, cantering half a mile, then trotting, then leading the animals by the reins at a fast walk before mounting to begin over. In stories, men galloped for ten miles, twenty, but even without snow, to gallop the whole four or five miles would have lamed half the horses and winded the

rest long before reaching the Hook. The silence of the fading night was broken only by the crunch of hooves or boots in the snow crust, the creak of saddle leather, and sometimes the muttered curses of men who caught a toe on a hidden stone. No one wasted breath on complaints or talk. They had all done this often, and men and horses hit an easy rhythm that covered ground quickly.

The land around Tar Valon was rolling plain for the most part, dotted with widely spaced copses and thickets, few large, but all thick with darkness. Large or small, Lan eyed those clumps of trees carefully as he led his men past, and he kept the column well away. Aiel were very good at using whatever cover they could find, places where most men would be sure a dog could not hide, and very good at springing ambushes. Nothing stirred, though. For all his eyes could see, the band he led could have been the only living men in the world. The hoot of an owl was the only sound he heard that they did not make.

The sky in the east was a much paler gray by the time the low ridge called the Hook came into sight. Well under a mile in length, the treeless crest rose little more than forty feet above the surrounding ground, but any elevation gave some advantage in defense. The name came from the way the northern end curved back toward the south, a feature plainly visible as he arranged his men in a long line along the top of the ridge to either side of him. The light was definitely growing. To the west, he thought he could make out the pale bulk of the White Tower itself, rising in the center of Tar Valon some three leagues distant.

The Tower was the tallest structure in the known world, yet it was overshadowed by the bulk of the lone mountain that rose out of the plains beyond the city, on the other side of the river. That was clear enough when there was any light at all. In the deepest night, you could see it blocking the stars. Dragonmount would have been a giant in the Spine of the World, but there on the plain, it was monstrous, piercing the clouds and rising taller. Higher above the clouds than most mountains were below, its broken peak always emitted a streamer of smoke. A symbol of hope and despair. A

mountain of prophecy. Glancing at it, Bukama made another sign against evil. No one wanted that prophecy fulfilled. But it would be, of course, one day.

From the ridgeline, gently rolling ground ran more than a mile to the west, to one of the larger thickets, half a league wide. Three trampled paths crisscrossed the snow between, where large numbers of horses or men afoot had passed. Without going closer, it was impossible to say who had made them, Aiel or men of the so-called Coalition, only that they had been made since the snowfall stopped, late two days ago.

There was no sign of Aiel yet, but if they had not changed direction, which was always possible, they could appear out of those trees any moment. Without waiting for Lan's order, men drove their lances point-down into the ground beneath the snow, where they could be snatched up again easily at need. Uncasing their horsebows, they pulled arrows from their quivers and nocked them, but did not draw. Only newlings thought they could hold a drawn bow for long. Lan alone carried no bow. His duty was to direct the fight, not to select targets. The bow was the preferred weapon against the Aiel, though many southlanders disdained it. Emares and his Tairens would ride straight into the Aiel with their lances and swords. There were times when that was the only way, but it was foolish to lose men needlessly, before you must, and as surely as peaches were poison, you did lose men in close quarters with Aiel.

He had no fear that the Aiel would turn aside on seeing them. They were not wild fighters, no matter what some said; they refused battle when the odds were too great. But six hundred Aiel would see the numbers as just right; they would be facing fewer than four hundred, although placed on the high ground. They would rush forward to attack and be met with a hail of arrows. A good horsebow could kill a man at three hundred paces and wound at four, if the man drawing it had the skill. That was a long corridor of steel for the Aiel to run. Unfortunately, they carried bows made of horn-and-sinew, too, just as effective as the horsebows. The worst would be if the Aiel stood and exchanged arrows; both sides would lose men however quickly

Emares arrived. Best would be if the Aiel decided to close; a running man could not shoot a bow with any accuracy. At least, it would be best if Emares was not behind time. Then the Aiel might try for the flanks, especially if they knew they were being followed, and that would kick open the hornets' nest. Either way, when Emares struck them from the rear, Lan would gather the lances and ride down.

In essence, that was the hammer and anvil. One force to hold the Aiel in place until the other struck it, then both closing in. A simple tactic, but effective; most effective tactics were simple. Even the pigheaded Cairhienin had learned to use it. A good many Altarans and Murandians had died because they refused to learn.

Grayness welled into light. The sun would be peeking over the horizon behind them soon, silhouetting them on the ridge. The wind gusted, catching Lan's cloak, but he assumed the *ko'di* once more and ignored the cold. He could hear Bukama and the other men near him breathing. Along the line, horses stamped their hooves impatiently in the snow. A hawk quartered above the open ground, hunting along the edge of the wide thicket.

Suddenly the hawk wheeled away and a column of Aiel appeared, coming out of the trees at a quick trot, twenty men abreast. The snow did not appear to hamper them to any great degree. Lifting their knees high, they moved as quickly as most men would have on cleared ground. Lan pulled his looking glass from the leather case tied to his saddle. It was a good glass, Cairhienin made, and when he pressed the brass-bound tube to his eyes, the Aiel, still a mile off, seemed to leap closer. They were tall men, many as tall as he and some taller, wearing coats and breeches in shades of brown and gray that stood out against the snow. Each had a cloth wrapped around his head, and a dark veil hiding his face to the eyes. Some might be women—Aiel women sometimes fought alongside the men—but most would be men. Each carried a short spear tipped in one hand, with a round, bull-hide buckler and several more spears clutched in the other. Their bows were in cases on their backs. They could do deadly work with those spears. And their bows.



The Aiel would have had to be blind to miss the horsemen waiting on them, but they came on without a pause, their column a thick serpent sliding out of the trees toward the ridge. Far to the west a trumpet sounded, thin with distance, and then another; to be that faint, they had to be near to the river, or even on the other side. The Aiel kept coming. A third trumpet called, far off, and a fourth, a fifth, more. Among the Aiel, heads swung, looking back. Was it the trumpets drew their attention, or did they know Emares was following?

The Aiel continued to issue from the trees. Someone had miscounted badly, or else more Aiel had joined the first party. Over a thousand were clear of the trees, now, and still more came. Fifteen hundred, and more behind. He slid the looking glass back into its case.

“Embrace death,” Bukama muttered, sounding like cold steel, and Lan heard other Borderlanders echo the words. He merely thought them; it was enough. Death came for every man eventually, and seldom where or when he expected. Of course, some men died in their beds, but from boyhood Lan had known he would not.

Calmly, he looked left and right along the line of his men. The Saldaeans and Kandori were standing firm, of course, but he was pleased to see that none of the Domani showed any signs of edginess, either. No one looked over a shoulder for a path to run. Not that he expected any less after two years fighting alongside them, but he always had more trust of men from the Borderlands than elsewhere. Bordermen knew that sometimes hard choices had to be made. It was in their bones.

The last of the Aiel cleared the trees, easily two thousand of them, a number that changed everything, and nothing. Two thousand Aiel were enough to overrun his men and still deal with Emares, unless the Dark One’s own luck was with them. The thought of withdrawing never arose. If Emares struck without the anvil in place, the Tairens would be slaughtered, but if he could hold until Emares arrived, then both hammer and anvil might be able to draw clear. Besides, he had given his word. Still, he did not mean to die here to no purpose, nor to have his men die to none. If Emares failed to

arrive by the time the Aiel came inside two hundred paces, he would wheel his company off the ridge and try to ride around the Aiel to join the Tairen. Sliding his sword from its scabbard, he held it loosely at his side. It was just a sword now, with nothing about it to catch the eye or set it out. It would never again be anything except a sword. But it held his past, and his future. The trumpets to the west were sounding almost continuously.

Abruptly, one of the Aiel in the front of the column raised his spear overhead, holding it up for the length of three strides. When he brought it down, the column came to a halt. A good five hundred paces separated them from the ridgeline, well beyond bowshot. Why under the Light? As soon as they were halted, the rear half of the column turned to face the way they had come. Were they simply being cautious? Safer to assume they knew about Emares.

Drawing out his looking glass again, left-handed, he studied the Aiel. Men in the front rank were shading their eyes with their spear-hands, studying the horsemen on the ridge. It made no sense. At best they would be able to make out dark shapes against the sunrise, perhaps the crest on a helmet. No more than that. The Aielmen seemed to be talking to each other. One of the men in the lead suddenly raised his hand overhead, holding a spear, and others did the same. Lan lowered his looking glass. All of the Aiel were facing forward, now, and every one held a spear raised high. He had never seen anything like this before.

As one, the spears came down, and the Aiel shouted a single word that boomed clearly across the space between, drowning the trumpets' distant calls. "*Aan'allein!*"

Lan exchanged wondering glances with Bukama. That was the Old Tongue, the language that had been spoken in the Age of Legends, and in the centuries before the Trolloc Wars. The best translation Lan could come up with was One Man Alone. But what did it *mean*? Why would the Aiel shout such a thing?

"They're moving," Bukama muttered, and the Aiel were.

But not toward the ridge. Turning northward, the column of veiled Aiel quickly reached a trot again and, once the head of it was well beyond the end of the ridge, began to angle eastward once more. Madness piled on madness. This was no flanking maneuver, not on only one side.

“Maybe they’re going back to the Waste,” Caniedrin called. He sounded disappointed. Other voices scoffed him loudly. The general view was that the Aiel would never leave until they were all killed.

“Do we follow?” Bukama asked quietly.

After a moment, Lan shook his head. “We will find Lord Emares and talk—politely—concerning hammers and anvils,” he said. He wanted to find out what all those trumpets were about, too. This day was beginning strangely, and he had the feeling there would be more oddities before it was done.



## Chapter

### 2

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### *A Wish Fulfilled*

Despite a fire blazing on the green marble hearth, the Amyrlin's sitting room was cold enough to make Moiraine shiver, and only a tight jaw kept her teeth from chattering. Of course, it also stopped her from yawning, which would never have done, half a night's sleep or not. The colorful winter tapestries hanging on the walls, bright scenes of spring and garden parks, ought to have had a coating of frost, and icicles should have been hanging from the scroll-carved cornices. For one thing, the fireplace lay on the other side of the room from her, and its warmth did not extend far. For another, the tall glassed casements behind her, filling the arched windows that let onto the balcony overlooking the Amyrlin's private garden, did not fit as well as they might, and they leaked cold around the edges. Whenever the wind gusted outside, an icy breeze hit her back and cut through her woolen dress. Another struck her closest friend, as well, but for all that Sivan was Tairen, she would not have let it show if she were freezing to death. The Sun Palace in Cairhien, where Moiraine had done most of her growing up, had often been as cold in winter, yet there she had never been forced to stand in drafts. The chill seeped from the marble floor tiles through the flowered Illianer carpet and Moiraine's slippers, too. The golden Great Serpent ring on her left hand, the snake biting its own tail that symbolized eternity and continuity and an initiate's bond to the Tower, felt like a band of ice. When the Amyrlin told an Accepted to stand over there and not bother her, however, the Accepted stood where the Amyrlin pointed and tried not to let her notice any shivers. Worse than the cold, really, was the heavy smell of acrid smoke that

even the heavy drafts could not dispel. It was not the smoke of chimneys, but of burned villages around Tar Valon.

Concentration on the cold kept her from fretting over the smoke. And the battle. The sky outside the windows held the gray of early morning, now. Soon, the fighting would begin again, if it had not already. She wanted to know how the battle was going. She had a *right* to know. Her uncle had started this war. She certainly did not excuse the Aiel in the slightest for the destruction they had brought to Cairhien, city and nation, but she knew where the ultimate blame lay. Since the Aiel arrived, though, Accepted had been confined to the Tower grounds as strictly as novices. The world outside the walls might as well have ceased to exist.

Reports came at regular intervals from Azil Mareed, High Captain of the Tower Guard, but the contents were not shared with anyone except full sisters, if with them. Questions about the fighting addressed to Aes Sedai earned admonitions to concentrate on your studies. As though the largest battle fought since Artur Hawkwing's time, and practically under her nose, was a mere distraction! Moiraine knew she could not be involved in any meaningful way—not in any way, really—yet she wanted to be, if only by knowing what was happening. That might be illogical, but then, she had never thought she was going to join the White Ajah once she gained the shawl.

The two silk-gowned women in shades of blue, seated on opposite sides of the small writing table on one side of the room, gave no sign that they were aware of the smoke or the cold, though they were almost as far from the fireplace as she. Of course, they were Aes Sedai, with ageless faces, and for the smoke, they had certainly seen the aftermath of more battles than any general. They could remain serenity made flesh if a thousand villages burned right in front of them. No one became Aes Sedai without learning to control her emotions at need, inwardly and outwardly. Tamra and Gitara did not seem tired, though they had taken only catnaps since the fighting began. That was why they had Accepted in attendance all night, in case they wanted errands run or someone brought to them. As for the cold, neither cold nor

heat touched sisters the way it did other people. They always appeared unaware of either. Moiraine had tried to work out how that was done; every Accepted tried sooner or later. However it was worked, it did not involve the One Power, or she would have been able to see the weaves, or at least feel them.

Tamra was more than simply Aes Sedai, she was the Amyrlin Seat, the ruler over all Aes Sedai. She had been raised from the Blue, but of course the long stole draped on her shoulders was striped in the colors of the seven Ajahs, to show that the Amyrlin was of all Ajahs and none. Over the history of the Tower, some Amyrlins had taken that more literally than others. Tamra's skirts were slashed with all seven colors, though that was not required. No Ajah could feel itself advantaged or disadvantaged with her. Beyond the Tower, when Tamra Ospenya spoke, kings and queens listened, whether they had Aes Sedai advisors or hated the White Tower. That was the power of an Amyrlin Seat. They might not take her advice or obey her instructions, but they listened, and politely. Even the High Lords of Tear and the Lord Captain Commander of the Children of the Light did that much. Her long hair, lightly streaked with gray and caught in a jeweled silver net, framed a square, determined face. She usually got her way with rulers, but she did not take her power lightly, or use it indiscriminately, either outside the Tower or inside. Tamra was fair and just, which were not always the same thing, and she was often kind. Moiraine admired her greatly.

The other woman, Tamra's Keeper of the Chronicles, was a different matter altogether. Perhaps the second most powerful woman in the Tower, and certainly at least equal to the Sitters, Gitara Moroso was always just, and usually fair, but kindness never seemed to occur to her. She was also flamboyant enough for a Green or a Yellow. Tall and close to voluptuous, she wore a wide necklace of firedrops, earrings with rubies the size of pigeon's eggs, and three jeweled rings beside her Great Serpent ring. Her dress was a deeper blue than Tamra's and brocaded, and the Keeper's stole on her shoulders—blue, since she also had been raised from the Blue—was nearly wide enough to be called a shawl. Moiraine had heard that Gitara still

considered herself a Blue, which would be shocking if true. The width of her stole certainly spoke in favor of the whispers; that was a matter of personal choice.

As with all Aes Sedai, once they had worked long enough with the One Power, it was impossible to put an age to Gitara's face. At a glance, you might think she was no more than twenty-five, perhaps less, then a second glance would say a youthful forty-five or fifty and still just short of great beauty, while a third changed it all again. That smooth, ageless face was the mark of Aes Sedai, to those who knew. To those who did not know, and many did not, her hair would have added to the confusion. Caught with carved ivory combs, it was white as snow. By whispered rumor, she was over three hundred years old, very old even for an Aes Sedai. Speaking of a sister's age was extremely rude. Even another sister would be given a penance for it; a novice or Accepted would find herself sent to the Mistress of Novices for a switching. But surely thinking about it did not count.

Something else placed Gitara out of the ordinary. She had the Foretelling sometimes, the Talent of speaking what was still in the future.

That was a very rare Talent, and came to her only occasionally, but gossip—the Accepted's quarters overflowed with tittle-tattle—gossip said that Gitara had had more than one Foretelling in the last few months. Some claimed that the reason the armies outside the city had been in place when the Aiel came was one of Gitara's Foretellings. No one among the Accepted knew for certain, of course. Maybe some of the other sisters did. Maybe. Even when the fact that Gitara had had a Foretelling was common knowledge, sometimes no one other than Tamra learned what it had been. It was foolish to hope to be present when Gitara had a Foretelling, yet Moiraine had hoped. But in the four hours since she and Siuan had replaced Temaile and Brendas in attendance on the Amyrlin, Gitara had only sat there writing a letter.

It suddenly hit her that close on four hours was a very long time to spend on one letter. And Gitara had not covered half of one sheet of paper yet. She was sitting there with her pen suspended above the cream-colored

page. As if Moiraine thinking of it had somehow reached her, Gitara glanced at the pen and made a small sound of irritation, then swirled the steel nib in a small red-glazed bowl of alcohol to clean away dried ink, clearly not for the first time. The liquid in the bowl was as black as that in the silver-capped ink jar of cut glass on the table. A gilt-edged leather folder full of papers lay open in front of Tamra, and she appeared to be studying them intently, yet Moiraine could not remember seeing the Amyrlin turn over a single sheet. The two Aes Sedai's faces were images of cool calm, but plainly they were worried, and that made her worried, too. She bit at her lower lip in furious thought, then had to stop when a yawn threatened. The biting, not the thinking.

It had to be something to make them worry today in particular. She had seen Tamra in the corridors yesterday, and if there had ever been a woman bubbling with confidence, it had been she. So. The battle that had been raging for the last three days. If Gitara really had Foretold the battle, if she really had had other Foretellings, what else might they have been? Guessing would do no good, but reasoning might. The Aiel crossing the bridges and breaking into the city? Impossible. In three thousand years, while nations rose and fell and even Hawkwing's empire was swept away in fire and chaos, no army had managed to breach Tar Valon's walls or break down its gates, and quite a few had tried over that time. Perhaps the battle turning to disaster in some other way? Or something needed to avoid disaster? Tamra and Gitara were the only two Aes Sedai actually in the Tower at that moment, unless some had returned in the night. There had been talk of injured soldiers in such numbers that all sisters with the smallest ability at Healing were needed, but no one had said straight out that that was where they were going. Aes Sedai could not lie, yet they often spoke obliquely, and they were not above misdirection. Sisters also could use the Power as a weapon if they or their Warders were in danger. No Aes Sedai had taken part in a battle since the Trolloc Wars, when they faced Shadowspawn and armies of Darkfriends, but perhaps Gitara had Foretold disaster unless Aes Sedai joined. But why wait until the third day? Could a Foretelling be that



detailed? Maybe if the sisters had entered the battle earlier, *that* would have caused....

Out of the corner of her eye, Moiraine saw Sivan smiling at her. That smile turned Sivan's face from handsome to pretty and made her clear blue eyes twinkle. Nearly a hand taller than Moiraine—Moiraine had gotten over the irritation she had once felt at being shorter than nearly all the women around her, but she could never help noticing height—taller and almost as fair-skinned as she, Sivan wore her formal Accepted's dress with an air of assurance that Moiraine had never quite mastered. The high-necked dresses were the purest white except for the bands at hem and cuffs that copied the Amyrlin's seven-colored stole. She could not understand how so many sisters of the White Ajah could bear to wear white all the time, as if they were forever in mourning. For her, the hardest thing about being a novice had been dressing in plain white day after day. The hardest aside from learning to control her temper, anyway. That still dropped her in hot water now and then, but not so often as during her first year.

"We'll find out when we find out," Sivan whispered with a quick glance at Tamra and Gitara. Neither moved an inch. Gitara's pen was held over the letter again, the ink drying.

Moiraine could not help smiling back. Sivan had that gift, making her smile when she wanted to frown and laugh when she wanted to weep. The smile turned into a yawn, and she looked hastily to see whether the Amyrlin or the Keeper had noticed. They were still absorbed in their own thoughts. When she turned back, Sivan had a hand over her own mouth and was glaring at her over it. Which almost set her giggling.

It had surprised her at first, she and Sivan becoming friends, but among novices and Accepted, the closest friends always seemed to be very much alike or very different. In some things she and Sivan were alike. They were both orphans; their mothers had died while they were young, their fathers since they left home. And both had been born with the spark, which was uncommon. They would have begun channeling the Power eventually

whether or not they had tried to learn how; not every woman could learn, by any means.

That was where the differences began, before they arrived in Tar Valon, and it was not just that Siuan had been born poor and she wealthy. In Cairhien, Aes Sedai were respected, and Moiraine had been given a grand dance in the Sun Palace to celebrate her departure for the Tower. In Tear, channeling was outlawed, and Aes Sedai were not popular. Siuan had been bundled onto a ship bound upriver for Tar Valon the very day a sister discovered she could learn to channel. There were so many differences, though none mattered between them. Among other things, Siuan had come to the Tower in full control of her temper, she was quick with puzzles, which Moiraine was not, she could not abide horses, which Moiraine loved, and she learned at a rate that left Moiraine dazed.

Oh, not about channeling the One Power. They had been entered in the novice book on the same day, and moved almost in lockstep with the Power, even to passing for Accepted on the same day. Moiraine, though, had received the education expected of a noblewoman, everything from history to the Old Tongue, which she spoke and read well enough that she had been excused classes in it. The daughter of a Tairen fisherman, Siuan arrived barely able to read or do more than the simplest arithmetic, but she had soaked her lessons in like sand soaking up water. She *taught* the Old Tongue to novices, now. At least the beginning classes.

Siuan Sanche was held up to novices as an example of what they should aspire to. Well, both of them were. Only one other woman had ever finished novice training in just three years. Elaida a'Roihan, a detestable woman, had completed her time as Accepted in three years, too, also a record, and it seemed at least possible that they might match that, as well. Moiraine was all too aware of her own shortcomings, but she thought that Siuan would make a perfect Aes Sedai.

She opened her mouth to whisper that patience was for stones, but wind rattled the casements, and another blast of freezing air hit her. She might as

well have been standing in her shift for all the protection her dress gave. Instead of whispering, she gasped, loudly.

Tamra turned her head toward the windows, yet not because of Moiraine. The sound of distant trumpets suddenly was floating on the wind, dozens of them. No, hundreds. To be heard here inside the Tower, there would have to be hundreds. And the sound was continuous, call rolling over call. Whatever the cause, it must be urgent. The Amyrlin closed the folder lying before her with a slap.

“Go see if there’s news from the battlefield, Moiraine.” Tamra spoke almost normally, but her voice held an unidentifiable edge, a sharpness. “Siuana, make some tea. Quickly, child.”

Moiraine blinked. The Amyrlin *was* worried. But there was only one thing to do.

“It will be as you say, Mother,” she and Siuana said together without hesitation, offering deep curtsies, and turned for the door to the anteroom, beside the fireplace. The gold-chased silver teapot sat on a ropework tray on a table near that door, along with a tea canister, a honey jar, a small pitcher of milk, and a large pitcher of water, all in worked silver. A second tray held cups made of delicate green Sea Folk porcelain. Moiraine felt a faint tingle as Siuana opened herself to the Source and embraced *saidar*, the female half of the Power; a glow surrounded her, though it would be visible only to another woman who could channel. Normally, channeling to do chores was forbidden, yet the Amyrlin had said quickly. Siuana was already preparing a thin thread of Fire to bring the tea water to a boil. Neither Tamra nor Gitara spoke a word to stop her.

The anteroom to the Amyrlin’s apartments was not large, since it was only meant to hold a few visitors until they could be announced. Delegations came to the Amyrlin in one of the audience halls or in her study next door, not her private chambers. Backed by the sitting-room fireplace, the anteroom was almost warm. There was only one chair, simply carved but large, yet despite its weight, the chair had been dragged closer to one of the gilded stand-lamps, so Elin Warrel, the slender novice on duty, would have

better light to read. Facing away from the sitting-room door and intent on her wood-bound book, she did not hear Moiraine cross the fringed carpet.

Elin should have felt her presence long before she was close enough to peer over the child's shoulder. Not really a child, since she had been seven years a novice and had come to the Tower at eighteen, but a novice was referred to as a child no matter her age. For that matter, Aes Sedai called Accepted "child," too. Moiraine had been able to feel the child's ability to channel soon after entering the room. Elin certainly should have been able to sense hers from this near. One woman who could channel could never sneak up on another if the second was paying attention.

Peering over Elin's shoulder, she recognized the book instantly. *Hearts of Flame*, a collection of love stories. The Tower Library was the largest in the known world, containing copies of almost every book that had ever been printed, but this was unsuitable for a novice. Accepted were granted a little leeway—by that time, you knew that you would watch a husband age and die, and your children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren, while you changed not at all—but novices were quietly discouraged from thinking about men or love, and kept away from men entirely. It would never do for a novice to try running away to get married or, worse, to get herself with child. Novice training was purposefully hard—if you were going to break, better it happened as a novice than as a sister. Being Aes Sedai was truly hard—and adding a child to it would only make matters beyond difficult.

"You should find more appropriate reading, Elin," Moiraine said levelly. "And pay more attention to your duties."

Before Moiraine finished speaking, Elin leaped to her feet with a startled gasp, the book tumbling to the floor, and whirled around. She was not tall for an Andoran, but Moiraine still had to look up to meet her eyes. When she saw Moiraine, she heaved a small sigh of relief. Very small. To novices, Accepted were only a tiny step below Aes Sedai. Elin spread her plain white skirts in a hasty curtsy. "No one could have come in without my seeing, Moiraine. Merean Sedai said I could read." She tilted her head to one side, toying with the wide white ribbon that held her hair. Everything novices

wore was white, even their thin leather slippers. “Why’s that book inappropriate, Moiraine?” She was three years the elder, but the Great Serpent ring and banded skirts marked a fount of knowledge in novice eyes. Unfortunately, there were subjects Moiraine felt uncomfortable talking about with just anyone. There was such a thing as decorum.

Picking up the volume, she handed it to the novice. “The Librarians would be very put out if you returned one of their books in damaged condition.” She felt a measure of satisfaction at that. It was the sort of reply a full sister might have given when she did not want to answer the question. Accepted practiced the Aes Sedai way of speaking against the day they gained the shawl, but the only ones to practice on safely were the novices. Some tried it with the servants, for a little while, but that only got them laughed at. Servants knew very well that in Aes Sedai eyes, Accepted were not a small step below the sisters but a small step above the novices.

As hoped for, Elin anxiously began examining the book for damage, and Moiraine went on before the novice could come back to her embarrassing question. “Have there been any messages from the field of battle, child?”

Elin’s eyes widened indignantly. “You know I’d have brought it in right away if there’d been any message, Moiraine. You know I would.”

She did know. Tamra had known, too. But while the Keeper or a Sitter might point out that the Amyrlin had given a foolish order—at least, she thought they might—an Accepted could only obey. For that matter, novices were not supposed to point out that an Accepted had asked a foolish question. “Is that the proper way to answer, Elin?”

“No, Moiraine,” Elin said contritely, bobbing another curtsy. “There hasn’t been any message the whole time I’ve been here.” Her head tilted again. “Did Gitara Sedai have a Foretelling?”

“Go back to your reading, child.” As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Moiraine knew they were wrong, contradicting what she had said before. It was too late for a recovery, now, though. Turning quickly, and hoping that Elin had not noticed the blush suddenly heating her face, she glided out of the anteroom with as much dignity as she could muster. Well,

the Mistress of Novices had told the child she could read, and the Librarians had let her take the book, if one of the Accepted had not loaned it to her. But Moiraine did hate sounding like a fool.

A faint trickle of steam was rising from the teapot's spout and more from the water pitcher when Moiraine reentered the sitting room and closed the door. The glow of *saidar* no longer shone around Sivan. Water boiled very quickly when the One Power was used; the trick was to keep it all from flashing to steam. Sivan had filled two of the green cups and was stirring honey into one. The other was milky.

Sivan pushed the cup she had been stirring toward Moiraine. "Gitara's," she said softly. And then in a whisper, with a grimace, "She likes enough honey to turn it to syrup. She told me not to be stingy!" The porcelain was just barely too hot on Moiraine's fingertips, but it should be cooled to exactly the right point by the time she crossed the room to the writing table where Gitara still sat, now drumming her fingers on the tabletop impatiently. The polished blackwood clock on the mantel over the fireplace chimed First Rise. The trumpets were still calling. They seemed to sound frantic, though Moiraine knew that was only imagination.

Tamra was standing at the windows, peering out at a sky that was growing brighter by the moment. She continued to stare out after Sivan had curtsied and proffered her cup, then finally turned and saw Moiraine. Instead of taking the tea, she said, "What news, Moiraine? You know better than to delay." Oh, she *was* on edge, to speak so. She had to know Moiraine would have spoken immediately if there had been anything.

Moiraine was just offering Gitara her own cup, but before she could reply, the Keeper jerked to her feet, bumping the table so hard that the ink jar overturned, spreading a pool of black across the tabletop. Trembling, she stood with her arms rigid at her sides and stared over the top of Moiraine's head, wide-eyed with terror. It *was* terror, plain and simple.

"He is born again!" Gitara cried. "I feel him! The Dragon takes his first breath on the slope of Dragonmount! He is coming! He is coming! Light help

us! Light help the world! He lies in the snow and cries like the thunder! He burns like the sun!”

With the last word, she gasped, a tiny sound, and fell forward into Moiraine’s arms. Moiraine dropped the teacup to try to catch her, but the truth of it was that the larger woman bore both of them to the carpet. It was all Moiraine could do to end up on her knees holding the Keeper rather than lying beneath her.

In an instant, Tamra was there, kneeling careless of the ink trickling from the table. The light of *saidar* already surrounded her, and she already had a weave prepared of Spirit, Air and Water. Gripping Gitara’s head between her hands, she let the weave sink into the still form. But delving, used to check health, did not turn to Healing. Looking helplessly into Gitara’s staring eyes, Moiraine knew why not. She had hoped there was some tiny fragment of life left, something that Tamra could work with. Healing could cure any sickness, mend any injury. But you could not Heal death. The pool of ink on the table had spread to ruin whatever the Keeper had been writing. It was very odd, what you noticed at a time like this.

“Not now, Gitara,” Tamra breathed softly. She sounded weary to the bone. “Not now, when I need you most.”

Slowly, her eyes came up to meet Moiraine’s, and Moiraine started back on her knees. It was said Tamra’s stare could make a stone move, and at that moment, Moiraine believed. The Amyrlin shifted her gaze to Sivan, still standing in front of the windows. Sivan had both hands pressed to her mouth, and the teacup she had been carrying lay on the carpet at her feet. She gave a jerk under that gaze, too.

Moiraine’s eye found the cup she had been carrying. *A good thing the cups did not break*, she thought. *Sea Folk porcelain is quite expensive*. Oh, the mind did play odd tricks when you wanted to avoid thinking about something.

“You are both intelligent,” Tamra said finally. “And not deaf, unfortunately. You know what Gitara just Foretold.” There was just enough

question in that for both of them to nod and say that they did. Tamra sighed as if she had been wishing for a different response.

Taking Gitara out of Moiraine's arms, the Amyrlin eased her down to the carpet and smoothed her hair. After a moment, she pulled the wide blue stole from Gitara's shoulders, folded it carefully, and laid it over the Keeper's face.

"With your permission, Mother," Suan said in a husky voice, "I'll send Elin to fetch the Keeper's serving woman to do what's needful."

"Stay!" Tamra barked. That iron-hard gaze studied them both. "You will tell no one about this, not for any reason. If necessary, lie. Even to a sister. Gitara died without speaking. Do you understand me?"

Moiraine nodded jerkily, and was aware of Suan doing the same. They were not Aes Sedai, yet—they still could lie, and some did occasionally, for all their efforts to behave like full sisters—but she had never been expected to be *ordered* to, especially not to Aes Sedai, and never by the Amyrlin Seat.

"Good," Tamra said tiredly. "Send—the novice on duty is named Elin?—send Elin in to me. I'll tell her where to find Gitara's woman." And make sure that Elin had heard nothing through the closed door, obviously. Otherwise, the task would have been Suan's or Moiraine's. "When the girl comes in, the two of you may go. And remember! Not a word! Not one!" The emphasis only drove home the peculiarity. An order from the Amyrlin Seat was to be obeyed as if on oath. There was no need to emphasize anything.

*I wished to hear a Foretelling, Moiraine thought as she made her final curtsy before leaving, and what I received was a Foretelling of doom. Now, she wished very much that she had been more careful of what she wished for.*





## Chapter

### 3

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#### *Practice*

The wide corridor outside the Amyrlin's apartments was as cold as her sitting room had been, and full of drafts. Some were strong enough to ripple one or another of the long, heavy tapestries on the white marble walls. Atop the gilded stand-lamps between the bright wall hangings, the flames flickered, nearly blown out. The novices would be at their breakfast at this hour, and likely most of the other Accepted, too. For the moment, the hallways were empty save for Sivan and Moiraine. They walked along the blue runner, half the width of the corridor, taking advantage of the small protection the carpet gave from the chill of the floor tiles, a repeating pattern in the colors of all seven Ajahs. Moiraine was too stunned to speak. The faint sound of the trumpets still sounding barely registered on her.

They turned the corner into a hallway where the floor tiles were white, the runner green. To their right, another wide, tapestry-hung corridor lined with stand-lamps spiraled gently upward, toward the Ajahs' quarters, the visible portion floored in blue and yellow, with a runner patterned in gray and brown and red. Inside each Ajah's quarters, the Ajah's own color predominated, and some others might be missing altogether, but in the communal areas of the Tower, the colors of all the Ajahs were used in equal proportion. Irrelevant thoughts drifted through her head. Why equal, when some Ajahs were larger than others? Had they once been the same size? How could that have been achieved? A newly raised Aes Sedai chose her Ajah freely. Yet each Ajah had quarters of the same size. Irrelevant thoughts were better than....

"Do you want breakfast?" Sivan said.

Moiraine gave a small start of surprise. Breakfast? “I could not swallow a bite, Siuan.”

The other woman shrugged. “I have no appetite myself. I just thought I’d keep you company if you wanted something.”

“I am going back to my room and try to get a little sleep, if I can settle myself. I have a novice class in two hours.” And likely more classes to teach today, if the sisters did not start returning soon. Novices could not miss classes for little things like battles or.... She did not want to think about the “or.” She would miss lessons, too, if the Aes Sedai failed to return. Accepted studied on their own for the most part, but she had a private class scheduled with Meilyn Sedai, and another with Larelle Sedai.

“Sleep would be wasting time we don’t have,” Siuan said firmly. “We’ll practice for the testing. We might have almost a month, but it could be tomorrow just as easily.”

“We cannot be sure we *will* be tested any time soon. Merean just said she thought we were close.”

Siuan snorted. Loudly. While she was still a novice the sisters had cleaned up her language, which had been strongly redolent of the docks and often rough with it, but they still had not managed to smooth away all the edges of her. Which was just as well. Rough edges were a part of Siuan. “When Merean says someone is close, she tests within the month, and you know it, Moiraine. We’ll practice.”

Moiraine sighed. She did not really believe she could sleep, not now, but she doubted she could concentrate very well, either. Practice took concentration. “Oh, all right, Siuan.”

The second surprise, after their friendship, had been the realization that between them, the fisherman’s daughter led and the noblewoman followed. Of course, rank in the outside world carried no rights inside the Tower. There had been two daughters of beggars who rose to be Amyrlin Seat, as well as daughters of merchants and farmers and craftsfolk, including three daughters of cobblers, but only one daughter of a ruler. Besides, Moiraine had been taught to judge people’s capabilities long before she left home. In

the Sun Palace especially, you began learning that as soon as you were old enough to walk. Sivan had been born to lead. It felt surprisingly natural to follow where Sivan led.

“I wager you will be in the Hall of the Tower by the time you have worn the shawl a hundred years, and Amyrlin before fifty more,” she said, not for the first time. It brought the same reaction it always did.

“Don’t ill-wish me,” Sivan said with a scowl. “I intend to see the world. Maybe parts of it no other sister has seen. I used to watch the ships sail into Tear full of silk and ivory from Shara, and I’d wonder if any of the crew had had the nerve to sneak outside the trade ports. I would have.” Her face matched Tamra’s for determination. “Once, my father took his boat all the way downriver to the Sea of Storms, and I could hardly pull on the nets for staring south, wondering what lay beyond the horizon. I’ll see it, one day. And the Aryth Ocean. Who knows what lies west of the Aryth Ocean? Strange lands with strange customs. Maybe cities as great as Tar Valon, and mountains higher than the Spine of the World. Just think of it, Moiraine. Just think!”

Moiraine suppressed a smile. Sivan was so fierce about her intended adventures, though she would never call them that. Adventures were what took place in stories and books, not in life, as Sivan would point out to anyone who used the word. Without a doubt, though, once she had the shawl, she would be off like an arrow leaving the bow. And then they might see one another twice in ten years if not longer. That brought a pang of sadness, but she did not doubt that her own predictions would come true, as well. It did not take Foretelling. No; that was thinking in the wrong direction.

As they turned another corner and walked past a narrow marble staircase leading down, Sivan’s scowl faded, and she began studying Moiraine in sidelong glances. The floor tiles here were a vivid green, the runner deep yellow, and the white walls were plain and bare. The stand-lamps were not gilded in this part of the Tower, which was used more by servants than sisters.

“You’re trying to change the subject, aren’t you,” Siuan said abruptly.

“Which subject?” Moiraine asked, half laughing. “Practice or breakfast?”

“You know what subject, Moiraine. What do you think about it?”

The bubble of laughter vanished. There was no need to ask what “it” was. Exactly the thing that she did *not* want to think about. *He is born again*. She could hear Gitara’s voice in her head. *The Dragon takes his first breath....* Her shiver had nothing to do with the cold this time.

For more than three thousand years the world had waited on the Prophecies of the Dragon to be fulfilled, fearing them, yet knowing they told of the world’s only hope. And now a boychild was about to be born—very soon, perhaps, by the way Gitara had spoken—to bring those Prophecies to a conclusion. He would be born on the slopes of Dragonmount, reborn where it was said the man he had once been had died. Three thousand years ago and more, the Dark One had almost broken free into the world of humankind and brought on the War of the Shadow, which had ended only with the Breaking of the World. Everything had been destroyed, the very face of the earth changed, humanity reduced to ragged refugees. Centuries passed before the simple struggle for survival gave way to building cities and nations once more. That infant’s birth meant the Dark One would break free again, for the child would be born to face the Dark One in Tarmon Gai’don, the Last Battle. On him rested the fate of the world. The Prophecies said he was the only chance. They did not say he would win.

Maybe worse than the thought of his defeat, though, was the fact that he would channel *saidin*, the male half of the One Power. Moiraine did not shiver at that; she shuddered. *Saidin* bore the Dark One’s taint. Men still tried to channel from time to time. Some actually managed to teach themselves, and survived learning without a teacher, no easy feat. Among women, only one in four survived trying to learn on their own. Some of those men caused wars, usually false Dragons, men who claimed to be the Dragon Reborn, while others attempted to hide in ordinary lives, but unless they were caught and brought to Tar Valon to be gentled—cut off from the Power forever—every one of them went mad. That could take years, or just months,

yet it was inevitable. Madmen who could tap into the One Power that turned the Wheel of Time and drove the universe. The histories were full of the horrors men like that had done. And the Prophecies said that the Dragon Reborn would bring a new Breaking of the World. Would his victory be any better than a victory by the Dark One? Yes; yes, it must be. Even the Breaking had left people alive to rebuild, eventually. The Dark One would leave only a charnel house. And in any case, prophecies did not turn aside for the wishes of Accepted. Not for the prayers of nations.

“What I think is that the Amyrlin told us not to talk about it,” she said.

Siuana shook her head. “She told us not to tell anyone else. Since we already know, it must be all right for us to talk about it between us.” She cut off as a stout serving woman with the white Flame of Tar Valon on her breast appeared around a corner just ahead of them.

As the round woman walked past, she peered down her long nose at them suspiciously. Perhaps they looked guilty. Male servants often turned a blind eye to what Accepted, and even novices, got up to; perhaps they wanted no more involvement with Aes Sedai than their jobs entailed. Female servants, on the other hand, kept as close a watch as the sisters themselves.

“As long as we’re careful,” Siuana breathed, once the liveried woman was beyond earshot. However certain she was that talking between themselves was all right, she seemed content to say no more until they reached the Accepted’s quarters, in the Tower’s western wing.

There, stone-railed galleries in a hollow well surrounded a small garden, three levels below. The garden was only a handful of evergreen bushes poking through the snow at this time of year. An Accepted who put her feet too far wrong might find herself clearing away that snow with a shovel—the sisters were great believers that physical labor built character—but no one had gotten into that much trouble lately. Resting her hands on the railing, Moiraine peered up at the bright winter-morning sky, past the six silent rows of galleries above. Her breath made a white mist in front of her face. The trumpets were more audible here than in the hallways, the stink of smoke stronger in the air.

There were rooms for over a hundred Accepted in this well, and the same in a second well, too. Perhaps the numbers would not have come to mind now except for Gitara's Foretelling, yet she had thought about them before. They were etched in her brain as if with acid. Space for above two hundred Accepted, but the second well had been shut up since time out of memory for any living Aes Sedai, and barely more than sixty of these rooms were occupied. The novices' quarters also had two wells, with rooms for almost four hundred girls, but one of those was long closed, too, and the other held under a hundred. She had read that once novices and Accepted had both been housed two to a room. Once, half the girls who were entered in the novice book had been tested for the ring; fewer than twenty of the current novices would be allowed to. The Tower had been built to house three thousand sisters, but only four hundred and twenty-three were in residence at the moment, with perhaps twice as many more scattered across the nations. Numbers that still burned like acid. No Aes Sedai would say it aloud, and she would never dare say it where a sister might hear, but the White Tower was failing. The Tower was failing, and the Last Battle was coming.

"You worry too much," Sivan said gently. "My father used to say, 'Change what you can if it needs changing, but learn to live with what you can't change.' You'll only get a sick stomach, otherwise. That was me, not my father." With another snort, she gave an overdone shiver and wrapped her arms around herself. "Can we get inside now? I'm freezing. My room is closest. Come on."

Moiraine nodded. The Tower taught its students to live with what they could not change, too. But some things were important enough to try even if you were sure to fail. That had been one of *her* lessons as a child.

Accepted's rooms were identical, except in detail, slightly wider at the back than at the door, with plain wall panels of dark wood. None of the furnishings were fine, or indeed anything a sister would have tolerated. There was a small, square Taraboner rug woven in faded blue and green stripes on Sivan's floor, and the mirrored washstand in the corner held a

chipped white pitcher sitting in the washbasin. Accepted were required to make do unless something actually broke, and if it broke, they had best have a good explanation why. The small table, with three leather-bound books stacked on it, and the two ladder-back chairs could have come from a penniless farmer's house, but Siuan's slept-in bed with its tumbled blankets was wide, like something from a moderately prosperous farmhouse. A small wardrobe completed the furnishings. Nothing was carved or ornamented in any way. When Moiraine had moved from the small, stark room of a novice, she had felt as if she were moving into a palace, though the chamber was half the size of any room in her apartments in the Sun Palace. Best of all, at the moment, was the fireplace of dressed gray stone. Today, any room with a fireplace would seem a palace, if she could stand near it.

Siuan hastily moved three pieces of split wood to the fireirons on the hearth—the woodbox was almost empty; serving men brought Aes Sedai their firewood, but Accepted had to carry theirs up themselves—then grunted when she discovered that her efforts at banking the coals of last night's fire had failed. No doubt in a hurry to reach the Amyrlin's chambers, she had not covered them with ashes well enough to stop them from burning out. A frown creased her forehead for a moment, and then Moiraine felt that small tingle again as the light of *saidar* briefly surrounded the other woman. Any woman who could channel could feel another wielding the Power if she was close enough, but the tingle was unusual. Women who spent a lot of time together in their training sometimes felt it, but the sensation was supposed to fade away over time. Hers and Siuan's never had. Sometimes Moiraine thought it was a sign of how close their friendship was. When the glow winked out, the short lengths of log were burning merrily.

Moiraine said nothing, but Siuan gave her a look as if she had delivered a speech. "I was too cold to wait, Moiraine," she said defensively. "Besides, you must remember Akarrin's lecture two weeks ago. 'You must know the rules to the letter,'" she quoted, "'and live with them before you can know which rules you may break and when.' That says right out that sometimes you can break the rules."

Akarrin, a slender Brown with quick eyes to catch who was not following her, had been lecturing about being Aes Sedai, not Accepted, but Moiraine held her tongue. Suan had not needed the lecture to think about breaking rules. Oh, she never broke the major strictures—she never tried to run away or was disrespectful to a sister or anything of that sort, and she would never think of stealing—but she had had a liking for pranks from the start. Well, Moiraine did, too. Most Accepted did, at least now and then, and some novices, as well. Playing jokes was a way to relieve the strain of constant study with few freedays. Accepted had no chores beyond those necessary to keep themselves and their rooms tidy, unless they got into trouble at least, but they were expected to work hard at their studies, harder than novices dreamed of. Some relief was needed, or you would crack like an egg dropped on stone.

Nothing she and Suan had done was malicious, of course. Washing a hated Accepted's shift with itchoak did not count. Elaida had made their first year as novices a misery, setting standards for them that no one could have met, yet insisting they be met. The second year, after she gained the shawl, had been worse until she left the Tower. Most of their pranks had been much more benign, though even the most innocent could bring swift punishment, especially if the target was an Aes Sedai. Their major triumph had been filling the largest fountain in the Water Garden with fat green trout one night the previous summer. Major in part because of the difficulty, and in part because they had escaped discovery. A few sisters had directed suspicious looks at them, but luckily no one could prove they had done it. Luckily, asking them whether they had was simply not done with Accepted. Putting trout in the fountain might not have brought a visit to the Mistress of Novices' study, but leaving the Tower grounds without permission in order to buy them—and worse, at night!—surely would have. Moiraine hoped that Suan was not building up to a prank with this talk of breaking rules. She herself was too tired; they were bound to be caught.

“Will you go first, or shall I?” she asked. Maybe the practice would take Suan's mind off getting into trouble.



“You need the practice more. We’ll concentrate on you this morning. And this afternoon. And tonight.”

Moiraine grimaced, but it was true. The test for the shawl consisted of creating one hundred different weaves perfectly and in a precise order while under great stress. And it was necessary to display complete calm the entire time. Exactly what that stress would be, they did not know, except that attempts would be made to distract them, and to break their composure. For practice, they provided the distractions for each other, and Suan was very good at throwing her off at the worst moment or provoking her temper. Too much temper, and you could not hold on to *saidar* at all; even after her six years of work at it, her channeling required at least a degree of calm. Suan could seldom *be* unsettled, and her temper was held with an iron grip.

Embracing the True Source, Moiraine let *saidar* fill her. Not as much of it as she could hold, but enough for practicing. Channeling was tiring work, and the more of the Power you channeled, the worse. Even that tiny amount spread through her, filling her with joy and life, with exultation. The wonder of it was near to torment. When she had first embraced *saidar*, she had not known whether to weep or laugh. She immediately felt the urge to draw more, and forced the desire down. All of her senses were clearer, sharper, with the Power in her. She thought she could almost hear Suan’s heart beating. She could feel the currents of air moving against her face and hands, and the colors banding her friend’s dress were more vivid, the white of the wool whiter. She could make out tiny cracks in the wall panels that she could not have seen without putting her nose against the wall, lacking the Power that suffused her totally. It was exhilarating. She felt...more alive. Part of her wished she could hold *saidar* every waking moment, but that was strictly prohibited. That desire could lead to drawing more and more, until eventually you drew more than you could handle. And that either killed you, or else burned the ability to channel out of you. Losing this...bliss...would be much worse than death.

Suan took one of the chairs, and the glow enveloped her. Moiraine could not see the light around herself, of course. Weaving a ward against

eavesdropping around the inside of the room, flat against walls and floor and ceiling, Siuan tied it off so she did not have to maintain it. Holding two weaves at once was more than twice as taxing as one, three more than twice as wearing as two. Beyond that, difficult no longer sufficed as a description, though it could be done. She motioned for Moiraine to turn her back.

With a frown for the ward, Moiraine complied. It would be easy to avoid distraction if she could see the weaves Siuan was preparing for her. But why ward against eavesdropping? Someone with an ear pressed to the door would hear nothing if she screamed at the top of her lungs. Surely Siuan would not do anything to make her scream. No. It had to be the first part of trying to unsettle her, by making her wonder over it. She felt Siuan handling flows, Earth and Air, then Fire, Water and Spirit, then Earth and Spirit, always changing. Without looking, there was no way to tell whether the other woman was creating a weave or just trying another diversion. Taking a deep breath, she concentrated on utter calm.

Most of the weaves in the test were extremely complex, and had been designed solely for the test. Oddly, none required any gestures, which a good many weaves did. The motion was not really part of the weave, except that if you did not make it, the weave did not work. Supposedly, the gestures set certain pathways in your mind. The lack of gestures made it seem possible that you might lack the use of your hands during at least part of the test, and that sounded ominous. Another oddity was that none of those incredibly intricate weaves actually *did* anything, and even done incorrectly, they would not produce anything dangerous. Not too dangerous, anyway. That was a very real possibility with a number of weaves. Some of the simplest could prove disastrous, done just a little off. Women had died in the testing, but obviously not from bungling a weave. Still, a mistake with the first could yield a deafening thunderclap.

She channeled very thin flows of Air, weaving them just so. This was a fairly simple weave, but you could not force *saidar* no matter how small the threads. The Power was like a vast river, flowing inexorably onward; try to force it, and you would be swept away like a twig on the River Erinin. You

had to use its overwhelming strength to guide it as you wanted. In any case, size was not specified, and small was less work. And the noise would be smaller if Siuan managed to....

“Moiraine, do you think the Reds will be able to make themselves leave him alone?”

Moiraine gave a jerk even before the weave she was making produced a boom like a kettledrum. Any sister was expected to deal with a man who could channel if she encountered one, but Reds concentrated on hunting them down. Siuan meant the boychild. That explained the ward. And maybe the talk of breaking rules. Maybe Siuan was not so sure as she pretended that Tamra would not care if they discussed the child between themselves. Moiraine glared over her shoulder.

“Don’t stop,” Siuan said calmly. She was still channeling, but not doing anything beyond handling the flows. “You really do need practice if you fumbled that one. Well, do you? About the Reds?”

This time, the weave produced a silver-blue disc the size of a small coin that dropped into Moiraine’s outstretched hand. The shape was not specified, either, another oddity, but discs and balls were easiest. Woven of Air yet hard as steel, it felt slightly cold. She released the weave, and the “coin” vanished, leaving only a residue of the Power that would soon fade away as well.

The next weave was one of the complex and useless sort, requiring all of the Five Powers, but Moiraine answered as she wove it. She *could* talk and channel at the same time, after all. Air and Fire so, and Earth thus. Spirit, then Air once more. She wove without stopping. For some reason, you could not hold these weaves only partly done for very long or they collapsed into something else entirely. Spirit again, then Fire and Earth together. “They will have twenty years to learn how. Or nearly so, at worst. At best, they will have longer.” Girls sometimes, if rarely, began channeling as young as twelve or thirteen, if they were born with the spark, but even with the spark boys never did before eighteen or nineteen, unless they tried to learn how, and in some men the spark did not come out until they were as old as thirty. Air again,

then Spirit and Water, all placed precisely. “Besides, he will be the Dragon Reborn. Even the Reds will have to see that he cannot be gentled until after he fights the Last Battle.” A grim fate, to save the world if he could, then for reward be cut off from this wonder. Prophecy was not known for mercy any more than for yielding to prayers. Earth again, then Fire, then more Air. The thing was beginning to look like the most hopeless knot in the world.

“Will that be enough? I’ve heard some Reds don’t try all that hard to take those poor men alive.”

She had heard that, too, but it was only a rumor. And a violation of Tower law. A sister could be birched for it, and likely exiled to a secluded farm to think on her crime for a time. It should be counted as murder, but given what those men would do unrestrained, she could almost see why it was not. More Spirit laid down, and Earth threaded through. Invisible fingers seemed to run up her sides to her armpits. She was ticklish, as Suan knew well, but the other woman would need to do better than that. She barely flinched. “As someone told me not long ago, learn to live with what you cannot change,” she said wryly. “The Wheel of Time weaves as the Wheel wills, and Ajahs do what they do.” More Air, and Fire like so, followed by Water, Earth *and* Spirit. Then all five at once. Light, what a ghastly tangle! And not done yet.

“What I think,” Suan began, and the door banged open, letting in a surge of freezing air that swept away all the warmth of the fire. With *saidar* filling her, her awareness heightened, Moiraine felt suddenly covered with a coat of ice from head to toe.

The door also let in Myrelle Berengari, an Accepted from Altara who had earned the ring in the same year as they. Olive-skinned and beautiful, and almost as tall as Suan, Myrelle was gregarious and also mercurial, with a boisterous sense of humor and a temper even worse than Moiraine’s when she let it go. The two of them had begun with heated words as novices that got them both switched and had somehow found themselves friends. Oh, not so close as Suan and she, but still friends, the only reason she did not snap at the other Accepted for walking in without knocking. Not that they would

have heard if she had pounded, with the ward set. Not that *that* mattered. There was the principle of the thing!

“How long before the Last Battle, do you think?” Myrelle asked, shutting the door. She took in the half-completed weave in front of Moiraine and the ward around the room, and a grin appeared on her lips. “Practicing for the test, I see. Have you been making her squeal, Sivan? I can help, if you like. I know a sure way to make her squeal like a piglet caught in a net.”

Moiraine hurriedly let the weave dissipate before it could collapse and exchanged confused looks with Sivan. How could Myrelle know?

“I did not squeal like...in the way you said,” she said primly, playing for time. Most Accepted’s pranks were aimed at other Accepted, and Myrelle’s numbers almost matched hers and Sivan’s. That particular one had involved ice in the depths of summer heat, when even shade felt like an oven. But she had not sounded *anything* like a piglet!

“What do you mean, Myrelle?” Sivan asked cautiously.

“Why, the Aiel, of course. What else could I mean?”

Moiraine exchanged another look with Sivan, of chagrin this time. A number of sisters claimed that various passages in the Prophecies of the Dragon referred to the Aiel. Of course, just as many said they did not. At the beginning of the war, there had been rather animated discussions about the matter. They would have been called shouting arguments if the women involved had not been Aes Sedai. But with what they knew now, all of that had slipped right out of Moiraine’s head, and plainly out of Sivan’s, as well. Keeping their knowledge hidden was going to take constant vigilance.

“The pair of you have a secret, don’t you?” Myrelle said. “I don’t know anybody for having secrets like you two. Well, don’t think I’ll ask, because I won’t.” By her expression, she was dying to ask.

“It isn’t ours to tell,” Sivan replied, and Moiraine’s eyebrows climbed before she could control her face. What was Sivan up to? Was she trying to play *Daes Dae’mar*? Moiraine had tried to teach her how the Game of Houses worked. In Cairhien, even servants and farmers knew how to maneuver for advantage and deflect others from their own plans and secrets.

In Cairhien, nobles and commoners alike lived by *Daes Dae'mar*, more so than anywhere else, and the Game was played everywhere, even in lands where everyone denied it. For all Moiraine's efforts, though, Suan had never shown much facility. She was just too straightforward. "But you can help me with Moiraine," the woman went on, even more surprisingly. Their practice was always just the two of them. "She knows my tricks too well by now."

Laughing, Myrelle rubbed her hands together gleefully and took the second chair, the light of the Power springing up around her.

Grimly, Moiraine turned her back again and took up the second weave, but Suan said, "From the beginning, Moiraine. You know better. You have to have the order fixed in your head so firmly that *nothing* can make you fumble it."

With a small sigh, Moiraine produced the silver-blue coin of Air once more, then moved on.

Suan was right, in a way, about her knowing Suan's tricks. Suan liked to use tickles at the worst possible moment, sudden pokes in unpleasant places, embarrassing caresses, and startling noises right beside her ear. That and saying the most shocking things she could think of, and she had a vivid imagination even after the sisters' work with her language. Knowing the other woman's tricks did not make it any easier to hold on to complete composure, though. She had to start over twice because of Suan. Myrelle was worse. She liked ice. Ice was easy to make, a matter of using Water and Fire to draw it out of the air. But Moiraine would like to see how Myrelle managed to make it materialize *inside* her dress, in the worst places. Myrelle also channeled flows to make sly pinches and sharp flicks as if Moiraine had been snapped with a switch, and sometimes a solid blow across her bottom like the fall of a strap. They were real pinches and real blows; the bruises they left were real, too. Once, Myrelle lifted her a foot off the ground with ropes of Air—she was certain it was her; Suan had never done anything like this—and slowly rotated her head down and feet pointed toward the ceiling so her skirts fell down over her head. Heart pounding and close to frantic, she pushed her skirts up from in front of her face with her hands. It was not

modesty; she had to keep weaving. You could hold a weave without seeing it, but you could not weave, and if this particular bundle of the Five Powers collapsed, it would give her a painful shock, as though she had scuffed her feet across a carpet and then touched a piece of iron, only three times as bad and felt all over. She managed to complete that one successfully, but all in all, Myrelle broke her concentration *four* times!

She felt a growing irritation over that, but with herself, not Myrelle. One thing every Accepted agreed on was that whatever the sisters did to you in the test would be worse than anything your friends could think of. And if they *were* your friends, they would do the worst they could think of, short of actual harm, to help you prepare. Light, if Myrelle and Suan could make her fail six times in so short a time, what hope did she have in the actual test? But she kept on with unbending determination. She would pass, and on her first try. She would!

She was making that second weave yet again when the door opened once more, and she let the flows vanish, reluctantly let go of *saidar* altogether. There was always a reluctance to let go. Life seemed to drain away along with the Power; the world became drab. But she would not have had time to finish in any case before her novice class. Accepted were not allowed clocks, which were too expensive for most to afford in any event, and the gongs that sounded the hour were not always audible inside the Tower, so it was best if you developed a keen sense of time. Accepted were no more permitted to be late than novices were.

The woman who stood holding the door open was not a friend. Taller than Suan, Tarna Feir was from the north of Altara, close to Andor, but her pale yellow hair was not her only difference from Myrelle. Accepted were not allowed to be arrogant, yet one look into those cold blue eyes told you that she was. She possessed no sense of humor, either, and as far as anyone knew, she had never played a joke on anyone. Tarna had gained the ring a year before Suan and Moiraine, after nine years as a novice, and she had had few friends as a novice and few now. She did not seem to notice the lack. A *very* different woman from Myrelle.

“I should have expected to find you two together,” she said coolly. There never seemed to be any heat in her. “I can’t understand why you don’t just move into the same room. Are you joining Sivan’s coterie now, Myrelle?” All said matter-of-factly, yet Myrelle’s eyes began to flash. The glow had vanished from Sivan, but Myrelle still held the Power. Moiraine hoped she was not rash enough to use it.

“Go away, Tarna,” Sivan said with a quick dismissive gesture. “We’re busy. And close the door.” Tarna did not move.

“I have to hurry to make my novice class,” Moiraine said, to Sivan. Tarna, she ignored. “They are just learning how to make a ball of fire, and if I am not there, one of them is sure to try it anyway.” Novices were forbidden to channel or even embrace the Source without a sister or one of the Accepted looking over their shoulders, but they did anyway, given half a chance. New girls never really believed the dangers involved, while the older were always sure they knew how to avoid those dangers.

“The novices have been given a freeday,” Tarna said, “so no classes today.” Being dismissed and ignored did not disconcert her a bit. Nothing did. No doubt Tarna would pass for the shawl on her first try with ease. “The Accepted are summoned to the Oval Lecture Hall. The Amyrlin is going to address us. One other thing you should know. Gitara Moroso died just a few hours ago.”

The light surrounding Myrelle winked out. “So that’s the secret you were keeping!” she exclaimed. Her eyes flashed hotter than they had for Tarna.

“I told you it wasn’t ours to share,” Sivan replied. An Aes Sedai answer if ever there was one. It was enough to make Myrelle nod agreement, however reluctantly. And that nod *was* reluctant. Her eyes did not lose their heat. Moiraine expected that she and Sivan might soon have surprising encounters with ice.

Still holding the door open—was the woman immune to the cold, like a sister?—Tarna studied Moiraine and then Sivan. “That’s right; you two would have been in attendance. What happened? All the rest of us have heard is that she died.”



“I was handing her a cup of tea when she gasped and fell dead in my arms,” Moiraine replied. And that was an even better Aes Sedai answer than Siuan’s, every word true while avoiding the whole truth.

To her surprise, an expression of sadness crossed Tarna’s face. It was fleeting, but it had been there. Tarna *never* showed emotion. She was carved from stone. “Gitara Sedai was a great woman,” she murmured. “She will be badly missed.”

“Why is the Amyrlin going to speak to us?” Moiraine asked. Plainly Gitara’s death had already been announced, and by custom, her funeral would be tomorrow, so there was no need to announce that. Surely Tamra did not mean to tell the *Accepted* about the Foretelling?

“I don’t know,” Tarna replied, all coolness once more. “But I shouldn’t have stood here talking. Everyone else was told to leave breakfast immediately. If we run, we can just make it before the Amyrlin arrives.”

Accepted were required to maintain a certain amount of dignity, preparation for the day they reached the shawl. They certainly were never supposed to run unless ordered to. But run they did, Tarna as hard as the rest of them, hiking their skirts to their knees and ignoring the startled looks of liveried servants in the corridors. Aes Sedai did not keep the Amyrlin Seat waiting. Accepted never even *thought* of it.

The Oval Lecture Hall, with its wide scrollwork crown running beneath a gently domed ceiling painted with sky and white clouds, was seldom used. Moiraine and the others were the last of the Accepted to arrive, yet the rows of polished wooden benches were less than a quarter filled. The babble of voices, Accepted offering suggestions of why the Amyrlin would address them, seemed to emphasize how few they were compared to what the chamber had been built to hold. Moiraine put dwindling numbers firmly out of her head. Maybe, if the sisters.... No. She would *not* brood.

Thankfully, the dais at the front of the hall was still empty. She and Siuan found places at the back of the crowd, and Tarna sat beside them, but clearly not with them. The woman wore aloofness like a cloak. Myrelle, still in a huff over not being told about Gitara, stalked around to the other end of

the row. Half the women in the room seemed to be talking, all on top of one another. It was nearly impossible to make out what anyone in particular was saying, and the little Moiraine did hear was utter nonsense. *All* of them to be tested for the shawl? *Immediately*? Aledrin must have brain fever to be spouting such drivel. Well, she *was* excitable. Brendas was even worse. Normally sensible, she was claiming they were all to be sent home because Gitara had Foretold the end of the White Tower, or maybe of the world, before she died. Likely by noon there would be a dozen tales about Gitara having a Foretelling if there were not more than that already—rumors grew in the Accepted’s quarters like roses in a hothouse—but Moiraine still did not like hearing one. To keep their secret, she was going to have to spin the truth like a top, at least for the next few days. She hoped she was up to it.

“Does anybody know anything,” Sivan asked the Accepted next to her, a slim, very dark woman with straight black hair hanging to her waist and a scattering of black tattoos on her hands, “or is it all just wind?”

Zemaille regarded her soberly for a moment before saying, “Wind, I think.” Zemaille always took her time. For that matter, she was always sober and thoughtful. Very likely, she would choose Brown when she was raised. Or perhaps White.

She was a rarity in the Tower, one of the Sea Folk, the Atha’an Miere. There were only four Sea Folk Aes Sedai, all Browns, and two of them were almost as old as Gitara had been. Atha’an Miere girls never came to the Tower unless they manifested the spark or managed to begin learning on their own. In either case, a delegation of Sea Folk delivered the girl, then left as soon as they could. The Atha’an Miere disliked being very long away from salt water, and the nearest sea to Tar Valon lay four hundred leagues to the south.

Zemaille, though, seemed to want to forget her origins. At least, she would never talk about the Sea Folk unless pressed by an Aes Sedai. And she was diligent, intently focused on earning the shawl from her first day, so Moiraine had heard, though she was not quick to learn. Not slower than most, just not quick. She had been Accepted for eight years, now, and ten