

Embers Falling on Dry Grass

Prologue

The sun, climbing toward midmorning, stretched Galad's shadow and those of his three armored companions ahead of them as they trotted their mounts down the road that ran straight through the forest, dense with oak and leatherleaf, pine and sourgum, most showing the red of spring growth. He tried to keep his mind empty, still, but small things kept intruding. The day was silent save for the thud of their horses' hooves. No bird sang on a branch, no squirrel chattered. Too quiet for the time of year, as though the forest held its breath. This had been a major trade route once, long before Amadicia and Tarabon came into being, and bits of ancient paving stone sometimes studded the hard-packed surface of yellowish clay. A single farm cart far ahead behind a plodding ox was the only sign of human life now besides themselves. Trade had shifted far north, farms and villages in the region dwindled, and the fabled lost mines of Aelgar remained lost in the tangled mountain ranges that began only a few miles to the south. Dark clouds massing in that direction promised rain by afternoon if their slow advance continued. A red-winged hawk quartered back and forth along the border of the trees, hunting the fringes. As he himself was hunting. But at the heart, not on the fringes.

The manor house that the Seanchan had given Eamon Valda came into view, and he drew rein, wishing he had a helmet strap to tighten for excuse. Instead he had to be content with re-buckling his sword belt, pretending that it had been sitting wrong. There had been no point to wearing armor. If the morning went as he hoped, he would have had to remove breastplate and mail in any case, and if it went badly, armor would have provided little more protection than his white coat.

Formerly a deep-country lodge of the King of Amadicia, the building was a huge, blue-roofed structure studded with red-painted balconies, a wooden palace with wooden spires at the corners atop a stone foundation like a low, steep-sided hill. The outbuildings, stables and barns, workmen's small houses and craftsfolks' workshops, all hugged the ground in the wide clearing that surrounded the main house, but they were nearly as resplendent in their blue-and-red paint. A handful of men and women moved around them, tiny figures yet at this distance, and children were playing under their elders' eyes. An image of normality where nothing was normal. His companions sat their saddles in their burnished helmets and breastplates, watching him without expression. Their mounts stamped impatiently, the animals' morning freshness not yet worn off by the short ride from the camp.

"It's understandable if you're having second thoughts, Damodred," Trom said after a time. "It's a harsh accusation, bitter as gall, but—"

"No second thoughts for me," Galad broke in. His intentions had been fixed since yesterday. He was grateful, though. Trom had given him the opening he needed. They had simply appeared as he rode out, falling in with him without a word spoken. There had

seemed no place for words, then. “But what about you three? You’re taking a risk coming here with me. A risk you have no need to take. However the day runs, there will be marks against you. This is my business, and I give you leave to go about yours.” Too stiffly said, but he could not find words this morning, or loosen his throat.

The stocky man shook his head. “The law is the law. And I might as well make use of my new rank.” The three golden star-shaped knots of a captain sat beneath the flaring sunburst on the breast of his white cloak. There had been more than a few dead at Jeramel, including no fewer than three of the Lords Captain. They had been fighting the Seanchan then, not allied with them.

“I’ve done dark things in service to the Light,” gaunt-faced Byar said grimly, his deep-set eyes glittering as though at a personal insult, “dark as moonless midnight, and likely I will again, but some things are too dark to be allowed.” He looked as if he might spit.

“That’s right,” young Bornhald muttered, scrubbing a gauntleted hand across his mouth. Galad always thought of him as young, though the man lacked only a few years on him. Dain’s eyes were bloodshot; he had been at the brandy again last night. “If you’ve done what’s wrong, even in service to the Light, then you have to do what’s right to balance it.” Byar grunted sourly. Likely that was not the point he had been making.

“Very well,” Galad said, “but there’s no fault to any man who turns back. My business here is mine alone.”

Still, when he heeled his bay gelding to a canter, he was pleased to have them gallop to catch him and fall in alongside, white cloaks billowing behind. He would have gone on alone, of course, yet their presence might keep him from being arrested and hanged out of hand. Not that he expected to survive in any case. What had to be done, had to be done, no matter the price.

The horses’ hooves clattered loudly on the stone ramp that climbed to the manor house, so every man in the broad central courtyard turned to watch as they rode in: fifty of the Children in gleaming plate-and-mail and conical helmets, most mounted, with cringing, dark-coated Amadician grooms holding animals for the rest. The inner balconies were empty except for a few servants who appeared to be watching while pretending to sweep. Six Questioners, big men with the scarlet shepherd’s crook upright behind the sunflare on their cloaks, stood close around Rhadam Asunawa like a bodyguard, away from the others. The Hand of the Light always stood apart from the rest of the Children, a choice the rest of the Children approved. Gray-haired Asunawa, his sorrowful face making Byar look fully fleshed, was the only Child present not in armor, and his snowy cloak carried just the brilliant red crook, another way of standing apart. But aside from marking who was present, Galad had eyes for only one man in the courtyard. Asunawa might have been involved in some way—that remained unclear—yet only the Lord Captain Commander could call the High Inquisitor to account.

Eamon Valda was not a large man, yet his dark, hard face had the look of one who expected obedience as his due. As the very least he was due. Standing with his booted feet apart and his head high, command in every inch of him, he wore the white-and-gold tabard of the Lord Captain Commander over his gilded breast- and backplates, a silk tabard more richly embroidered than any Pedron Niall had worn. His white cloak, the flaring sun large on either breast in thread-of-gold, was silk as well, and his gold-embroidered white coat. The helmet beneath his arm was gilded and worked with the flaring sun on the brow, and a heavy gold ring on his left hand, worn outside his steel-backed gauntlet, held a large yellow sapphire carved with the sunburst. Another mark of favor received from the Seanchan.

Valda frowned slightly as Galad and his companions dismounted and offered their salutes, arm across the chest. Obsequious grooms came running to take their reins.

“Why aren’t you on your way to Nassad, Trom?” Disapproval colored Valda’s words. “The other Lords Captain will be halfway there by now.” He himself always arrived late when meeting the Seanchan, perhaps to assert that some shred of independence remained to the Children—finding him already preparing to depart was a surprise; this meeting must be very important—but he always made sure the other high-ranking officers arrived on time even when that required setting out before dawn. Apparently it was best not to press their new masters too far. Distrust of the Children was always strong in the Seanchan.

Trom displayed none of the uncertainty that might have been expected from a man who had held his present rank barely a month. “An urgent matter, my Lord Captain Commander,” he said smoothly, making a very precise bow, neither a hair deeper nor higher than protocol demanded. “A Child of my command charges another of the Children with abusing a female relative of his, and claims the right of Trial Beneath the Light, which by law you must grant or deny.”

“A strange request, my son,” Asunawa said, tilting his head quizzically above clasped hands, before Valda could speak. Even the High Inquisitor’s voice was doleful; he sounded pained at Trom’s ignorance. His eyes seemed dark hot coals in a brazier. “It was usually the accused who asked to give the judgment to swords, and I believe usually when he knew the evidence would convict him. In any case, Trial Beneath the Light has not been invoked for nearly four hundred years. Give me the accused’s name, and I will deal with the matter quietly.” His tone turned chill as a sunless cavern in winter, though his eyes still burned. “We are among strangers, and we cannot allow them to know that one of the Children is capable of such a thing.”

“The request was directed to me, Asunawa,” Valda snapped. His glare might as well have been open hatred. Perhaps it was just dislike of the other man’s breaking in. Flipping one side of his cloak over his shoulder to bare his ring-quilloned sword, he rested his hand on the long hilt and drew himself up. Always one for the grand gesture, Valda raised his voice so that even people inside probably heard him, and declaimed rather than merely spoke.

“I believe many of our old ways should be revived, and that law still stands. It will always stand, as written of old. The Light grants justice because the Light is justice. Inform your man he may issue his challenge, Trom, and face the one he accuses sword-to-sword. If that one tries to refuse, I declare that he has acknowledged his guilt and order him hanged on the spot, his belongings and rank forfeit to his accuser as the law states. I have spoken.” That with another scowl for the High Inquisitor. Maybe there really was hatred there.

Trom bowed formally once more. “You have informed him yourself, my Lord Captain Commander. Damodred?”

Galad felt cold. Not the cold of fear, but of emptiness. When Dain drunkenly let slip the confused rumors that had come to his ears, when Byar reluctantly confirmed they were more than rumors, rage had filled Galad, a bone-burning fire that nearly drove him insane. He had been sure his head would explode if his heart did not burst first. Now he was ice, drained of any emotion. He also bowed formally. Much of what he had to say was set in the law, yet he chose the rest with care, to spare as much shame as possible to a memory he held dear.

“Eamon Valda, Child of the Light, I call you to Trial Beneath the Light for unlawful assault on the person of Morgase Trakand, Queen of Andor, and for her murder.” No one had been able to confirm that the woman he regarded as his mother was dead, yet it must be so. A dozen men were certain she had vanished from the Fortress of the Light before it fell to the Seanchan, and as many testified she had not been free to leave of her own will.

Valda displayed no shock at the charge. His smile might have been intended to show regret over Galad’s folly in making such a claim, yet contempt was mingled in it. He opened his mouth, but Asunawa cut in once more.

“This is ridiculous,” he said in tones more of sorrow than of anger. “Take the fool, and we’ll find out what Darkfriend plot to discredit the Children he is part of.” He motioned, and two of the hulking Questioners took a step toward Galad, one with a cruel grin, the other blank-faced, a workman about his work.

Only one step, though. A soft rasp repeated around the courtyard as Children eased their swords in their scabbards. At least a dozen men drew entirely, letting their blades hang by their sides. The Amadician grooms hunched in on themselves, trying to become invisible. Likely they would have run, had they dared. Asunawa stared around him, thick eyebrows climbing up his forehead in disbelief, knotted fists gripping his cloak. Strangely, even Valda appeared startled for an instant. Surely he had not expected the Children to allow an arrest after his own proclamation. If he had, he recovered quickly.

“You see, Asunawa,” he said almost cheerfully, “the Children follow my orders, and the law, not a Questioner’s whims.” He held out his helmet to one side for someone to take. “I deny your preposterous charge, young Galad, and throw your foul lie in your teeth. For it is a lie, or at best a mad acceptance of some malignant rumor started by Darkfriends or

others who wish the Children ill. Either way, you have defamed me in the vilest manner, so I accept your challenge to Trial Beneath the Light, where I will kill you.” That barely squeezed into the ritual, but he had denied the charge and accepted the challenge; it would suffice.

Realizing that he still held the helmet in an outstretched hand, Valda frowned at one of the dismounted Children, a lean Saldaean named Kashgar, until the man stepped forward to relieve him of it. Kashgar was only an under-lieutenant, almost boyish despite a great hooked nose and thick mustaches like inverted horns, yet he moved with open reluctance, and Valda’s voice was darker and acrid as he went on, unbuckling his sword belt and handing that over, too.

“Take a care with that, Kashgar. It’s a heron-mark blade.” Unpinning his silk cloak, he let it fall to the paving stones, followed by his tabard, and his hands moved to the buckles of his armor. It seemed that he was unwilling to see if others would be reluctant to help him. His face was calm enough, except that angry eyes promised retribution to more than Galad. “Your sister wants to become Aes Sedai, I understand, Damodred. Perhaps I understand precisely where this originated. There was a time I would have regretted your death, but not today. I may send your head to the White Tower so the witches can see the fruit of their scheme.”

Worry creasing his face, Dain took Galad’s cloak and sword belt, and stood shifting his feet as though uncertain he was doing the right thing. Well, he had been given his chance, and it was too late to change his mind, now. Byar put a gauntleted hand on Galad’s shoulder and leaned close.

“He likes to strike at the arms and legs,” he said in a low voice, casting glances over his shoulder at Valda. From the way he glared, some matter stood between them. Of course, that scowl differed little from his normal expression. “He likes to bleed an opponent until the man can’t take a step or raise his sword before he moves for the kill. He’s quicker than a viper, too, but he’ll strike at your left most often and expect it from you.”

Galad nodded. Many right-handed men found it easier to strike so, but it seemed an odd weakness in a blademaster. Gareth Bryne and Henre Haslin had made him practice alternating which hand was uppermost on the hilt so he would not fall into that. Strange that Valda wanted to prolong a fight, too. He himself had been taught to end matters as quickly and cleanly as possible.

“My thanks,” he said, and the hollow-cheeked man made a dour grimace. Byar was far from likable, and he himself seemed to like no one save young Bornhald. Of the three, his presence was the biggest surprise, but he was there, and that counted in his favor.

Standing in the middle of the courtyard in his gold-worked white coat with his fists on his hips, Valda turned in a tight circle. “Everyone move back against the walls,” he commanded loudly. Horseshoes rang on the paving stones as the Children and the grooms obeyed. Asunawa and his Questioners snatched their animals’ reins, the High Inquisitor

wearing a face of cold fury. “Keep the middle clear. Young Damodred and I will meet here—”

“Forgive me, my Lord Captain Commander,” Trom said with a slight bow, “but since you are a participant in the Trial, you cannot be Arbiter. Aside from the High Inquisitor, who by law may not take part, I hold the highest rank here after you, so with your permission...?” Valda glared at him, then stalked over to stand beside Kashgar, arms folded across his chest. Ostentatiously he tapped his foot, impatient for matters to proceed.

Galad sighed. If the day went against him, as seemed all but certain, his friend would have the most powerful man in the Children as his enemy. Likely Trom would have had in any event, but more so now. “Keep an eye on them,” he told Bornhald, nodding toward the Questioners clustered on their horses near the gate. Asunawa’s underlings still ringed him like bodyguards, every man with a hand on his sword hilt.

“Why? Even Asunawa can’t interfere now. That would be against the law.”

It was very hard not to sigh again. Young Dain had been a Child far longer than he, and his father had served his entire life, but the man seemed to know less of the Children than he himself had learned. To Questioners, the law was what they said it was. “Just watch them.”

Trom stood in the center of the courtyard with his bared sword raised overhead, blade parallel to the ground, and unlike Valda, he spoke the words exactly as they were written. “Under the Light, we are gathered to witness Trial Beneath the Light, a sacred right of any Child of the Light. The Light shines on truth, and here the Light shall illuminate justice. Let no man speak save he who has legal right, and let any who seek to intervene be cut down summarily. Here, justice will be found under the Light by a man who pledges his life beneath the Light, by the force of his arm and the will of the Light. The combatants will meet unarmed where I now stand,” he continued, lowering the sword to his side, “and speak privately, for their own ears alone. May the Light help them find words to end this short of bloodshed, for if they do not, one of the Children must die this day, his name stricken from our rolls and anathema declared on his memory. Under the Light, it will be so.”

As Trom strode to the side of the courtyard, Valda moved toward the center in the walking stance called Cat Crosses the Courtyard, an arrogant saunter. He knew there were no words to stop blood being shed. To him, the fight had already begun. Galad merely walked out to meet him. He was nearly a head taller than Valda, but the other man held himself as though he were the larger, and confident of victory.

His smile was all contempt, this time. “Nothing to say, boy? Small wonder considering that a blademaker is going to cut your head off in about one minute. I want one thing straight in your mind before I kill you, though. The wench was hale the last I saw her,

and if she's dead now, I'll regret it." That smile deepened, both in humor and disdain. "She was the best ride I ever had, and I hope to ride her again one day."

Red-hot, searing fury fountained inside Galad, but with an effort he managed to turn his back on Valda and walk away, already feeding his rage into an imagined flame as his two teachers had taught him. A man who fought in a rage, died in a rage. By the time he reached young Bornhald, he had achieved what Gareth and Henre had called the oneness. Floating in emptiness, he drew his sword from the scabbard Bornhald proffered, and the slightly curved blade became a part of him.

"What did he say?" Dain asked. "For a moment there, your face was murderous."

Byar gripped Dain's arm. "Don't distract him," he muttered.

Galad was not distracted. Every creak of saddle leather was clear and distinct, every ringing stamp of hoof on paving stone. He could hear flies buzzing ten feet away as though they were at his ear. He almost thought he could see the movements of their wings. He was one with the flies, with the courtyard, with the two men. They were all part of him, and he could not be distracted by himself.

Valda waited until he turned before drawing his own weapon on the other side of the courtyard, a flashy move, the sword blurring as it spun in his left hand, leaping to his right hand to make another blurred wheel in the air before settling, upright and rock-steady before him, in both hands. He started forward, once more in Cat Crosses the Courtyard.

Raising his own sword, Galad moved to meet him, without thought assuming a walking stance perhaps influenced by his state of mind. Emptiness, it was called, and only a trained eye would know that he was not simply walking. Only a trained eye would see that he was in perfect balance every heartbeat. Valda had not gained that heron-mark sword by favoritism. Five blademasters had sat in judgment of his skills and voted unanimously to grant him the title. The vote always had to be unanimous. The only other way was to kill the bearer of a heron-mark blade in fair combat, one on one. Valda had been younger then than Galad was now. It did not matter. He was not focused on Valda's death. He focused on nothing. But he intended Valda's death if he had to. Sheathe the Sword, willingly welcoming that heron-mark blade in his flesh, to achieve it. He accepted that it might come to that.

Valda wasted no time with maneuvering. The instant he was within range, Plucking the Low-hanging Apple flashed toward Galad's neck like lightning, as though the man truly did intend to have his head in the first minute. There were several possible responses, all made instinct by hard training, but Byar's warnings floated in the dim recesses of his mind, and also the fact that Valda had warned him of this very thing. Warned him twice. Without conscious thought, he chose another way, stepping sideways and forward just as Plucking the Low-hanging Apple became the Leopard's Caress. Valda's eyes widened in surprise as his stroke missed Galad's left thigh by inches, widened more as Parting the

Silk laid a gash down his right forearm, but he immediately launched into the Dove Takes Flight, so fast that Galad had to dance back before his blade could bite deeply, barely fending off the attack with Kingfisher Circles the Pond.

Back and forth they danced the forms, gliding this way then that across the stone paving. Lizard in the Thorn-bush met Lightning of Three Prongs. Leaf on the Breeze countered Eel Among the Lily Pads, and Two Hares Leaping met the Hummingbird Kisses the Honeyrose. Back and forth as smoothly as a demonstration of the forms. Galad tried attack after attack, but Valda was as fast as a viper. The Wood Grouse Dances cost him a shallow gash on his left shoulder, and the Red Hawk Takes a Dove another on the left arm, slightly deeper. River of Light might have taken the arm completely had he not met the draw-cut with a desperately quick Rain in High Wind. Back and forth, blades flashing continuously, filling the air with the clash of steel on steel.

How long they fought, he could not have said. There was no time, only the moment. It seemed that he and Valda moved like men under water, their motions slowed by the drag of the sea. Sweat appeared on Valda's face, but he smiled with self-assurance, seemingly untroubled by the slash on his forearm, still the only injury he had taken. Galad could feel the sweat rolling down his own face, too, stinging his eyes. And the blood trickling down his arm. Those wounds would slow him eventually, perhaps already had, but he had taken two on his left thigh, and both were more serious. His foot was wet in his boot from those, and he could not avoid a slight limp that would grow worse with time. If Valda was to die, it must be soon.

Deliberately, he drew a deep breath, then another, through his mouth, another. Let Valda think him becoming winded. His blade lanced out in Threading the Needle, aimed at Valda's left shoulder and not quite as fast it could have been. The other man countered easily with the Swallow Takes Flight, sliding immediately into the Lion Springs. That took a third bite in his thigh; he dared not be faster in defense than in attack.

Again he launched Threading the Needle at Valda's shoulder, and again, again, all the while gulping air through his mouth. Only luck kept him from taking more wounds in those exchanges. Or perhaps the Light really did shine on this fight.

Valda's smile widened; the man believed him on the edge of his strength, exhausted and fixated. As Galad began Threading the Needle, too slowly, for the fifth time, the other man's sword started the Swallow Takes Flight in an almost perfunctory manner. Summoning all the quickness that remained to him, Galad altered his stroke, and Reaping the Barley sliced across Valda just beneath his rib cage.

For a moment it seemed that the man was unaware he had been hit. He took a step, began what might have been Stones Falling from the Cliff. Then his eyes widened, and he staggered, the sword falling from his grip to clatter on the paving stones as he sank to his knees. His hands went to the huge gash across his body as though trying to hold his insides within him, and his mouth opened, glassy eyes fixed on Galad's face. Whatever

he intended to say, it was blood that poured out over his chin. He toppled onto his face and lay still.

Automatically, Galad gave his blade a rapid twist to shake off the blood staining its last inch, then bent slowly to wipe the last drops onto Valda's white coat. The pain he had ignored now flared. His left shoulder and arm burned; his thigh seemed to be on fire. Straightening took effort. Perhaps he was nearer exhaustion than he had thought. How long had they fought? He had thought he would feel satisfaction that his mother had been avenged, but all he felt was emptiness. Valda's death was not enough. Nothing except Morgase Trakand alive again could be enough.

Suddenly he became aware of a rhythmic clapping and looked up to see the Children, each man slapping his own armored shoulder in approval. Every man. Except Asunawa and the Questioners. They were nowhere to be seen.

Byar hurried up carrying a small leather sack and carefully parted the slashes in Galad's coatsleeve. "Those will need sewing," he muttered, "but they can wait." Kneeling beside Galad, he took rolled bandages from the sack and began winding them around the gashes in his thigh. "These need sewing, too, but this will keep you from bleeding to death before you can get it." Others began gathering around, offering congratulations, men afoot in front, those still mounted behind. None gave the corpse a glance except for Kashgar, who cleaned Valda's sword on that already bloodstained coat before sheathing it.

"Where did Asunawa go?" Galad asked.

"He left as soon as you cut Valda the last time," Dain replied uneasily. "He'll be heading for the camp to bring back Questioners."

"He rode the other way, toward the border," someone put in. Nassad lay just over the border.

"The Lords Captain," Galad said, and Trom nodded.

"No Child would let the Questioners arrest you for what happened here, Damodred. Unless his Captain ordered it. Some of them would order it, I think." Angry muttering began, men denying they would stand for such a thing, but Trom quieted them, somewhat, with raised hands. "You know it's true," he said loudly. "Anything else would be mutiny." That brought dead silence. There had never been a mutiny in the Children. It was possible that nothing before had come as close as their own earlier display. "I'll write out your release from the Children, Galad. Someone may still order your arrest, but they'll have to find you, and you'll have a good start. It will take half the day for Asunawa to catch the other Lords Captain, and whoever falls in with him can't be back before nightfall."

Galad shook his head angrily. Trom was right, but it was all wrong. Too much was wrong. "Will you write releases for these other men? You know Asunawa will find a way to accuse them, too. Will you write releases for the Children who don't want to help the Seanchan take our lands in the name of a man dead more than a thousand years?" Several Taraboners exchanged glances and nodded, and so did other men, not all of them Amadician. "What about the men who defended the Fortress of the Light? Will any release get their chains struck off or make the Seanchan stop working them like animals?" More angry growls; those prisoners were a sore point to all of the Children.

Arms folded across his chest, Trom studied him as though seeing him for the first time. "What would you do, then?"

"Have the Children find someone, anyone, who is fighting the Seanchan and ally with them. Make sure that the Children of the Light ride in the Last Battle instead of helping the Seanchan hunt Aiel and steal our nations."

"Anyone?" a Cairhienin named Doirellin said in a high-pitched voice. No one ever made fun of Doirellin's voice. Though short, he was nearly as wide as he was tall, there was barely an ounce of fat on him, and he could put walnuts between all of his fingers and crack them by clenching his fists. "That could mean Aes Sedai."

"If you intend to be at Tarmon Gai'don, then you will have to fight alongside Aes Sedai," Galad said quietly. Young Bornhald grimaced in strong distaste, and he was not the only one. Byar half-straightened before bending back to his task. But no one voiced dissent. Doirellin nodded slowly, as if he had never before considered the matter.

"I don't hold with the witches any more than any other man," Byar said finally, without raising his head from his work. Blood was seeping through the bandages even as he wrapped. "But the Precepts say, to fight the raven, you may make alliance with the serpent until the battle is done." A ripple of nods ran through the men. The raven meant the Shadow, but everyone knew it was also the Seanchan Imperial sigil.

"I'll fight beside the witches," a lanky Taraboner said, "or even these Asha'man we keep hearing about, if they fight the Seanchan. Or at the Last Battle. And I'll fight any man who says I'm wrong." He glared as though ready to begin then and there.

"It seems matters will play out as you wish, my Lord Captain Commander," Trom said, making a much deeper bow than he had for Valda. "To a degree, at least. Who can say what the next hour will bring, much less tomorrow?"

Galad surprised himself by laughing. Since yesterday, he had been sure he would never laugh again. "That's a poor joke, Trom."

"It is how the law is written. And Valda did make his proclamation. Besides, you had the courage to say what many have thought while holding their tongues, myself among them. Yours is a better plan for the Children than any I've heard since Pedron Niall died."

“It’s still a poor joke.” Whatever the law said, that part had been ignored since the end of the War of the Hundred Years.

“We’ll see what the Children have to say on the matter,” Trom replied, grinning widely, “when you ask them to follow us to Tarmon Gai’don to fight alongside the witches.”

Men began slapping their shoulders again, harder than they had for his victory. At first it was only a few, then more joined in, until every man including Trom was signaling approval. Every man but Kashgar, that was. Making a deep bow, the Saldaean held out the scabbarded heron-mark blade with both hands.

“This is yours, now, my Lord Captain Commander.”

Galad sighed. He hoped this nonsense would fade away before they reached the camp. Returning there was foolish enough without adding in a claim of that sort. Most likely they would be pulled down and thrown in chains if not beaten to death even without it. But he had to go. It was the right thing to do.

Daylight began to grow on this cool spring morning, though the sun had yet to show even a sliver above the horizon, and Rodel Ituralde raised his gold-banded looking glass to study the village below the hill where he sat his roan gelding, deep in the heart of Tarabon. He did hate waiting for enough light to see. Careful of a glint off the lens, he held the end of the long tube on his thumb and shaded it with a cupped hand. At this hour, sentries were at their least watchful, relieved that the darkness where an enemy might sneak close was departing, yet since crossing from Almoth Plain he had heard tales of Aiel raids inside Tarabon. Were he a sentry with Aiel perhaps about, he would grow extra eyes. Peculiar that the country was not milling like a kicked anthep over those Aiel. Peculiar, and perhaps ominous. There were plenty of armed men to be found, Seanchan and Taraboners sworn to them, and hordes of Seanchan building farms and even villages, but reaching this far had been almost too easy. Today, the easiness ended.

Behind him among the trees, horses stamped impatiently. The hundred Domani with him were quiet, except for an occasional creak of saddle leather as a man shifted his seat, but he could feel their tension. He wished he had twice as many. Five times. In the beginning, it had seemed a gesture of good faith that he himself would ride with a force mainly composed of Taraboners. He was no longer certain that had been the right decision. It was too late for recriminations, in any event.

Halfway between Elmora and the Amadician border, Serana sat in a flat grassy valley among forested hills, with at least a mile to the trees in any direction save his, and a small, reed-fringed lake fed by two wide streams lay between him and the village. Not a place that could be surprised by daylight. It had been sizable before the Seanchan came, a stopping point for the merchant trains heading east, with over a dozen inns and nearly as many streets. Village folk were already getting about their day’s tasks, women balancing

baskets on their heads as they glided down the village streets and others starting the fires under laundry kettles behind their houses, men striding along toward their work-places, sometimes pausing to exchange a few words. A normal morning, with children already running and playing, rolling hoops and tossing beanbags among the throng. The clang of a smithy rose, dim with the distance. The smoke from breakfast fires was fading at the chimneys.

As far as he could see, no one in Serana gave a second glance to the three pairs of sentries with bright stripes painted across their breastplates, walking their horses back and forth perhaps a quarter of a mile out. The lake, considerably wider than the village, shielded the fourth side effectively. It seemed the sentries were an accepted matter of every day, and so was the Seanchan camp that had swollen Serana to more than twice its former size.

Ituralde shook his head slightly. He would not have placed the camp cheek-by-jowl with the village that way. The rooftops of Serana were all tile, red or green or blue, but the buildings themselves were wooden; a fire in the town could spread all too easily into the camp, where canvas store-tents the size of large houses far outnumbered the smaller tents where men slept, and great stacks of barrels and casks and crates covered twice as much ground as all the tents combined. Keeping lightfingered villagers out would be all but impossible. Every town had a few tickbirds who picked up anything they thought they could get away with, and even somewhat more honest men might be tempted by the proximity. The location did mean a shorter distance to haul water from the lake, and a shorter distance for soldiers to walk to reach the ale and wine in the village when off-duty, but it suggested a commander who kept slack discipline.

Slack discipline or not, there was activity in the camp, too. Soldiers' hours made farmers' hours seem restful. Men were checking the animals on the long horselines, bannermen checking soldiers standing in ranks, hundreds of laborers loading or unloading wagons, grooms harnessing teams. Every day, trains of wagons came down the road into this camp from east and west, and others departed. He admired the Seanchan efficiency at making sure their soldiers had what they needed when and where it was needed. Dragonsworn here in Tarabon, most sour-faced men who believed their dream snuffed out by the Seanchan, had been willing to tell what they knew if not to ride with him. That camp contained everything from boots to swords, arrows to horseshoes to water-flasks, enough to outfit thousands of men from the ground up. They would feel its loss.

He lowered the looking glass to brush a buzzing green fly away from his face. Two replaced it almost at once. Tarabon teemed with flies. Did they always come so early here? They would just have begun hatching at home by the time he reached Arad Doman again. If he did. No; no ill thoughts. When he did. Tamsin would be displeased, otherwise, and it was seldom wise to displease her too far.

Most of the men down there were hired workmen, not soldiers, and only a hundred or so of those Seanchan. Still, a company of three hundred Taraboners in stripe-painted armor had ridden in at noon the day before, more than doubling their numbers and requiring him

to change his plans. Another party of Taraboners, as large, had entered the camp at sunset, just in time to eat and bed down wherever they could lay their blankets. Candles and lamp oil were luxuries for soldiers. There was one of those leashed women, a damane, in the camp, too. He wished he could have waited until she left—they must have been taking her elsewhere; what use for a damane at a supply camp?—but today was the appointed day, and he could not afford to give the Taraboners reason to claim he was holding back. Some would snatch at any reason to go their own way. He knew they would not follow him much longer, yet he needed to hold as many as he could for a few days more.

Shifting his gaze to the west, he did not bother with the looking glass.

“Now,” he whispered, and as though at his command, two hundred men with mail veils across their faces galloped out of the trees. And immediately halted, cavorting and jockeying for place, brandishing steel-tipped lances while their leader raced up and down before them gesturing wildly in an obvious effort to establish some semblance of order.

At this distance, Ituralde could not have made out faces even with the glass, but he could imagine the fury on Tornay Lanaset’s features at playing out this charade. The stocky Dragonsworn burned to close with Seanchan. Any Seanchan. It had been difficult to dissuade him from striking the day they crossed the border. Yesterday he had been visibly overjoyed finally to scrape the hated stripes indicating loyalty to the Seanchan from his breastplate. No matter; so far he was obeying his orders to the letter.

As the sentries nearest Lanaset turned their mounts to speed toward the village and the Seanchan camp, Ituralde swung his attention there and raised his looking glass once more. The sentries would find their warning superfluous. Motion had ceased. Some men were pointing toward the horsemen on the other side of the village, while the rest seemed to be staring, soldiers and workmen alike. The last thing they expected was raiders. Aiel raids or no Aiel raids, the Seanchan considered Tarabon theirs, and safely so. A quick glance at the village showed people standing in the streets staring toward the strange riders. They had not expected raiders, either. He thought the Seanchan were right, an opinion he would not share with any Taraboner in the foreseeable future.

With well-trained men shock could last only so long, however. In the camp, soldiers began racing toward their horses, many still unsaddled, though grooms had started working as fast as they could. Eighty-odd Seanchan footmen, archers, formed into ranks and set off running through Serana. At that evidence that there truly was a threat, people began snatching up the smaller children and herding the older toward the hoped-for safety of the houses. In moments, the streets were empty save for the hurrying archers in their lacquered armor and peculiar helmets.

Ituralde turned the glass toward Lanaset and found the man galloping his line of horsemen forward. “Wait for it,” he growled. “Wait for it.”

Again it seemed the Taraboner heard his command, finally raising a hand to halt his men. At least they were still a half-mile or more from the village. The hotheaded fool was supposed to be near a mile away, on the edge of the trees and still in seeming disorder and easily swept away, but half would have to suffice. He suppressed the urge to finger the ruby in his left ear. The battle had begun, now, and in battle you had to make those following you believe that you were utterly cool, completely unaffected. Not wanting to knock down a putative ally. Emotion seemed to leak from a commander into his men, and angry men behaved stupidly, getting themselves killed and losing battles.

Touching the half-moon-shaped beauty patch on his cheek—a man should look his best on a day like today—he took slow measured breaths until certain that he was as cool inside as his outward display, then returned his attention to the camp. Most of the Taraboners there were mounted, now, but they waited for twenty or so Seanchan led by a tall fellow with a single thin plume on his curious helmet to gallop into the village before falling in behind, yesterday's late-comers trailing at the rear.

Ituralde studied the figure leading the column, viewing him through the gaps between houses. A single plume would mark a lieutenant or maybe an under-lieutenant. Which might mean a beardless boy on his first command or a grizzled veteran who could take your head if you made one mistake. Strangely, the damane, marked by the shining silvery leash that connected her to a woman on another horse, galloped her animal as hard as anyone. Everything he had heard said damane were prisoners, yet she appeared as eager as the other woman, the sul'dam. Perhaps—

Abruptly his breath caught in his throat and all thought of damane fled. There were people still in the street, seven or eight men and women, walking in a cluster and right ahead of the racing column that they seemed not to hear thundering up behind them. There was no time for the Seanchan to stop if they wanted to, and good reason not to try with an enemy ahead, but it looked as though the tall fellow's hand never twitched on his reins as he and the rest rode the people down. A veteran, then. Murmuring a prayer for the dead, Ituralde lowered the glass. What came next was best seen without it.

Two hundred paces beyond the village, the officer started forming his command where the archers had already stopped and were waiting with nocked arrows. Waving directions to the Taraboners behind, he turned to peer at Lanaset through a looking glass. Sunlight glinted off the tube's banding. The sun was rising, now. The Taraboners began dividing smoothly, lance heads glittering and all slanted at the same angle, disciplined men falling into ordered ranks to either side of the archers.

The officer leaned over to converse with the sul'dam. If he turned her and the damane loose now, this could still turn into a disaster. Of course, it could if he did not, too. The last of the Taraboners, those who had arrived late, began stretching out in a line fifty paces behind the others, driving their lances point-down into the ground and pulling their horse-bows from the cases fastened behind their saddles. Lanaset, curse the man, was galloping his men forward.

Turning his head for a moment, Ituralde spoke loudly enough for the men behind him to hear. "Be ready." Saddle leather creaked as men gathered their reins. Then he murmured another prayer for the dead and whispered, "Now."

As one man the three hundred Taraboners in the long line, his Taraboners, raised their bows and loosed. He did not need the looking glass to see the sul'dam and damane and the officer suddenly sprout arrows. They were all but swept from their saddles by near a dozen striking each of them at once. Ordering that had given him a pang, but the women were the most dangerous people on that field. The rest of that volley cut down most of the archers and cleared saddles, and even as men struck the ground, a second volley lanced out, knocking down the last archers and emptying more saddles.

Caught by surprise, the Seanchan-loyal Taraboners tried to fight. Among those still mounted, some wheeled about and lowered lances to charge their attackers. Others, perhaps seized by the irrationality that could take men in battle, dropped their lances and tried to uncase their own horse-bows. But a third volley lashed them, pile-headed arrows driving through breastplates at that range, and suddenly the survivors seemed to realize that they were survivors. Most of their fellows lay still on the ground or struggled to stand though pierced by two or three shafts. Those still mounted were now outnumbered by their opponents. A few men reined their horses around, and in a flash the lot of them were running south pursued by one final rain of bowshot that toppled more.

"Hold," Ituralde murmured. "Hold where you are."

A handful of the mounted archers fired again, but the rest wisely refrained. They could kill a few more before the enemy was beyond range, but this group was beaten, and before long they would be counting every arrow. Best of all, none of them went racing in pursuit.

The same could not be said of Lanaset. Cloaks streaming, he and his two hundred raced after the fleeing men. Ituralde imagined he could hear them yelping, hunters on the trail of running prey.

"I think we've seen the last of Lanaset, my Lord," Jaalam said, reining his gray up beside Ituralde, who shrugged slightly.

"Perhaps, my young friend. He may come to his senses. In any case, I never thought the Taraboners would return to Arad Doman with us. Did you?"

"No, my Lord," the taller man replied, "but I thought his honor would hold through the first fight."

Ituralde lifted his glass to look at Lanaset, still galloping hard. The man was gone, and unlikely to come to senses he did not possess. A third of his force gone as surely as if that damane had killed them. He had counted on a few more days. He would need to change plans again, perhaps change his next target.

Dismissing Lanaset from his thoughts, he swung the glass to glance at where those people had been ridden down, and grunted in surprise. There were no trampled bodies. Friends and neighbors must have come out to carry them away, though with a battle on the edge of the village that seemed about as likely as them getting up and walking away after the horses passed.

“It’s time to go burn all those lovely Seanchan stores,” he said. Shoving the looking glass into the leather case tied to his saddle, he donned his helmet and heeled Steady down the hill, followed by Jaalam and the others in a column of twos. Ruts from farm wagons and broken-down banks indicated a ford in the eastern stream. “And, Jaalam, tell a few men to warn the villagers to start moving what they want to save. Tell them to begin with the houses nearest the camp.” Where fire could spread one way, it could the other, too, and likely would.

In truth, he had already set the important blaze. Breathed on the first embers, at least. If the Light shone on him, if no one had been overcome by eagerness or given in to despair at the hold the Seanchan had on Tarabon, if no one had fallen afoul of the mishaps that could ruin the best-laid plan, then all across Tarabon, above twenty thousand men had struck blows like this, or would before the day was out. And tomorrow they would do it again. Now all he had to do was raid his way back across better than four hundred miles of Tarabon, shedding Taraboner Dragonsworn and gathering in his own men, then recross Almoth Plain. If the Light shone on him, that blaze would singe the Seanchan enough to bring them chasing after him full of fury. A great deal of fury, he hoped. That way, they would run headlong into the trap he had laid before they ever knew it was there. If they failed to follow, then at least he had rid his homeland of the Taraboners and bound the Domani Dragonsworn to fight for the King instead of against him. And if they saw the trap....

Riding down the hillside, Ituralde smiled. If they saw the trap, then he had another plan already laid, and another behind that. He always looked ahead, and always planned for every eventuality he could imagine, short of the Dragon Reborn himself suddenly appearing in front of him. He thought the plans he had would suffice for the moment.

The High Lady Suroth Sabelle Meldarath lay awake on her bed, staring up at the ceiling. The moon was down, and the triple-arched windows that overlooked a palace garden were dark, but her eyes had adjusted so that she could make out at least the outlines of the ornate, painted plasterwork. Dawn was no more than an hour or two off, yet she had not slept. She had lain awake most nights since Tuon vanished, sleeping only when exhaustion closed her eyes however hard she tried to keep them open. Sleep brought nightmares she wished she could forget. Ebou Dar was never truly cold, but the night held a little coolness, enough to help keep her awake, lying beneath only a thin silk sheet. The question that tainted her dreams was simple and stark. Was Tuon alive, or dead?

The escape of the Atha'an Miere damane and Queen Tylin's murder spoke in favor of her death. Three events of that magnitude happening on one night by chance was pressing coincidence too far, and the first two were horrifying enough in themselves to indicate the worst for Tuon. Someone was trying to sow fear among the Rhyagelle, Those Who Come Home, perhaps to disrupt the entire Return. How better to achieve that than to assassinate Tuon? Worse, it had to be one of their own. Because she had landed under the veil, no local knew who Tuon was. Tylin had surely been killed with the One Power, by a sul'dam and her damane. Suroth had leaped at the suggestion that Aes Sedai were to blame, yet eventually someone who mattered would question how one of those women could enter a palace full of damane in a city full of damane and escape detection. At least one sul'dam had been necessary to uncollar the Sea Folk damane. And two of her own sul'dam had disappeared at almost the same time.

In any case, they had been noticed as missing two days later, and no one had seen them since the night Tuon vanished. She did not believe they were involved, though they had been in the kennels. For one thing, she could not imagine Renna or Seta uncollaring a damane. They certainly had reasons enough to sneak away and seek employment far off, with someone ignorant of their filthy secret, someone like this Egeanin Tamarath who had stolen a pair of a damane. Strange that, for one newly raised to the Blood. Strange, but unimportant; she could see no way to tie it to the rest. Likely the woman had found the stresses and complexities of nobility too much for a simple sailor. Well, she would be found and arrested eventually.

The important fact, the potentially deadly fact, was that Renna and Seta were gone, and no one could say exactly when they had left. If the wrong person noted their departure so close to the critical time and made the wrong calculation.... She pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes and exhaled softly, very near to a groan.

Even should she escape suspicion of murdering Tuon, if the woman was dead, then she herself would be required to apologize to the Empress, might she live forever. For the death of the acknowledged heir to the Crystal Throne, her apology would be protracted, and as painful as it was humiliating; it might end with her execution, or much worse, with being sent to the block as property. Not that it would actually come to that, though in her nightmares it often did. Her hand slid beneath the pillows to touch the unsheathed dagger there. The blade was little longer than her hand, yet more than sharp enough to open her veins, preferably in a warm bath. If time came for an apology, she would not live to reach Seandar. The dishonor to her name might even be lessened a little if enough people believed the act was itself an apology. She would leave a letter explaining it so. That might help.

Still, there was a chance Tuon remained alive, and Suroth clung to it. Killing her and spiriting the body away might be a deep move ordered from Seanchan by one of her surviving sisters who coveted the throne, yet Tuon had arranged her own disappearance more than once. In support of the notion, Tuon's der'sul'dam had taken all of her sul'dam and damane into the country for exercise nine days ago, and they had not been seen since. Exercising damane did not require nine days. And just today—no; yesterday, now, by a

good few hours—Suroth had learned that the Captain of Tuon's bodyguard also had left the city nine days ago with a sizable contingent of his men and not returned. That was too much for coincidence, and very nearly proof. Near enough for hope, at least.

Each of those previous disappearances, however, had been part of Tuon's campaign to win the approval of the Empress, might she live forever, and be named heir. Each time, some competitor among her sisters had been forced or emboldened to acts that lowered her when Tuon reappeared. What need had she of such stratagems now, here? Rack her brains how she would, Suroth could not find a worthy target outside Seanchan. She had considered the possibility that she herself was the mark, but only briefly and only because she could think of no one else. Tuon could have stripped her of her position in the Return with three words. All she needed to do was remove the veil; here, the Daughter of the Nine Moons, in command of the Return, spoke with the voice of the Empire. Bare suspicion that Suroth was Atha'an Shadar, what those this side of the Aryth Ocean called a Darkfriend, might have been enough for Tuon to have handed her over to the Seekers for questioning. No, Tuon was aiming at someone else, or something else. If she did still live. But she had to. Suroth did not want to die. She fingered the blade.

Who or what else did not matter, except as a clue to where Tuon might be, but that was very important. Immensely so. Already, despite the announcement of an extended inspection trip, whispers floated among the Blood that she was dead. The longer she remained missing, the more those whispers would grow, and with them the pressure for Suroth to return to Seandar and make that apology. She could only resist so long before she would be adjudged sei'mosiev so deeply that only her own servants and property would obey her. Her eyes would be ground into the dirt. Low Blood as well as High, perhaps even commoners, would refuse to speak to her. Soon after that, she would find herself on a ship whatever her wishes.

Without doubt Tuon would be displeased at being found, yet it seemed unlikely her displeasure would extend so far as Suroth being dishonored and forced to slit her wrists; therefore Tuon must be found. Every Seeker in Altara was searching for her—those Suroth knew of, at least. Tuon's own Seekers were not among the known, yet they must be hunting twice as hard as any others. Unless they had been taken into her confidence. But in seventeen days, all that had been uncovered was that ridiculous story of Tuon extorting jewelry from goldsmiths, and that was known to every common soldier. Perhaps....

The arched door to the anteroom began to open slowly, and Suroth snapped her right eye shut to protect her night vision against the light of the outer room. As soon as the gap was wide enough, a pale-haired woman in the diaphanous robes of a da'covale slipped into the bedchamber and softly closed the door behind her, plunging the room into pitch blackness. Until Suroth opened her eye again, and made out a shadowy form creeping toward her bed. And another shadow, huge, suddenly looming in a corner of the room as Almandaragal rose noiselessly to his feet. The lopar could cross the room and snap the fool woman's neck in a heartbeat, but Suroth still gripped the hilt of her dagger. It was wise to have a second line of defense even when the first seemed impregnable. A pace

short of the bed, the da'covale stopped. Her anxious breathing sounded loud in the silence.

"Working up your courage, Liandrin?" Suroth said harshly. That honey-colored hair, worked in thin braids, had been enough to name her.

With a squeak, the da'covale dropped to her knees and bent to press her face to the carpet. She had learned that much, at least. "I would not harm you, High Lady," she lied. "You know I would not." Her voice was rushed, in a breathy panic. Learning when to speak and when not seemed as far beyond her as learning how to speak with proper respect. "We are both bound to serve the Great Lord, High Lady. Have I not proven I can be useful? I removed Alwhin for you, yes? You said you wished her dead, High Lady, and I removed her."

Suroth grimaced and sat up in the dark, the sheet sliding down to her lap. It was so easy to forget da'covale were there, even this da'covale, and then you let slip things you should not have. Alwhin had not been dangerous, merely a nuisance, awkward in her place as Suroth's Voice. She had achieved all she had ever wanted in reaching that, and the likelihood of her risking it by so much as the smallest betrayal had been tiny. True, had she broken her neck falling down a flight of stairs, Suroth would have felt some small relief from an irritant, but poison that left the woman with bulging eyes and a blue face was another matter. Even with the search for Tuon, that had brought the Seekers' eyes to Suroth's household. She had been forced to insist on it, for the murder of her Voice. That there were Listeners in her household, she accepted; every household had its share of Listeners. Seekers did more than listen, though, and they might uncover what must remain hidden.

Masking her anger required surprising effort, and her tone was colder than she wanted. "I hope you did not wake me merely to plead again, Liandrin."

"No, no!" The fool raised her head and actually looked straight at her! "An officer came from General Galgan, High Lady. He is waiting to take you to the general."

Suroth's head throbbed with irritation. The woman delayed delivering a message from Galgan and looked her in the eyes? In the dark, to be sure, yet an urge swept over her to strangle Liandrin with her bare hands. A second death hard on the heels of the first would intensify the Seekers' interest in her household, if they learned of it, but Elbar could dispose of the body easily; he was clever in such tasks.

Except, she enjoyed owning the former Aes Sedai who once had been so haughty with her. Making her a perfect da'covale in every way would be a great pleasure. It was time to have the woman collared, however. Already irritating rumors buzzed of an uncollared marath'damane among her servants. It would be a twelve-day wonder when the sul'dam discovered she was shielded in some way so she could not channel, yet that would help answer the question of why she had not been leashed before. Elbar would need to find some Atha'an Shadar among the sul'dam, though. That was never an easy task—

relatively few sul'dam turned to the Great Lord, oddly—and she no longer really trusted any sul'dam, but perhaps Atha'an Shadar could be trusted more than the rest.

“Light two lamps, then bring me a robe and slippers,” she said, swinging her legs over the side of the bed.

Liandrin scrambled to the table that held the lidded sand bowl on its gilded tripod and hissed when she found it with a careless hand, but she quickly used the tongs to lift out a hot coal, puffed it to a glow, and lit two of the silvered lamps, adjusting the wicks so the flames held steady and did not smoke. Her tongue might suggest that she felt herself Suroth's equal rather than a possession, yet the strap had taught her to obey commands with alacrity.

Turning with one of the lamps in her hand, she gave a start and a choked cry at the sight of Almandaragal looming in the corner, his dark, ridge-ringed eyes focused on her. You would think she had never seen him before! Yet he was a fearsome sight, ten feet tall and near two thousand pounds, his hairless skin like reddish brown leather, flexing his six toed forepaws so his claws extended and retracted, extended and retracted.

“Be at ease,” Suroth told the lopar, a familiar command, but he stretched his mouth wide, showing sharp teeth before settling back to the floor and resting his huge round head on his paws like a hound. He did not close his eyes again, either. Lopar were quite intelligent, and plainly he trusted Liandrin no more than she did.

Despite fearful glances at Almandaragal, the da'covale was quick enough to fetch blue velvet slippers and a white silk robe intricately embroidered in green, red and blue from the tall, carved wardrobe, and she held the robe for Suroth to thrust her arms into the sleeves, but Suroth had to tie the long sash herself, and to thrust out a foot before the woman remembered to kneel and fit the slippers on. Her eyes, but the woman was incompetent!

By the dim light, Suroth examined herself in the gilded stand-mirror against the wall. Her eyes were hollow and shadowed with weariness, the tail of her crest hung down her back in a loose braid for sleeping, and doubtless her scalp required a razor. Very well. Galgan's messenger would think her grief-stricken over Tuon, and that was true enough. Before learning the general's message, though, she had one small matter to take care of.

“Run to Rosala and beg her to beat you soundly, Liandrin,” she said.

The da'covale's tight little mouth dropped open and her eyes widened in shock. “But why?” she whined. “Me, I have done nothing!”

Suroth busied her hands with knotting the sash tighter to keep from striking the woman. Her eyes would be lowered for a month if it was learned that she had struck a da'covale herself. She certainly owed no explanations to property, yet once Liandrin did become

completely trained, she would miss these opportunities to grind the woman's face in how far she had fallen.

"Because you delayed telling me of the general's messenger. Because you still call yourself 'I' rather than Liandrin. Because you meet my eyes." She could not help hissing that. Liandrin had huddled in on herself with every word, and now she directed her eyes to the floor, as if that would mitigate her offense. "Because you questioned my orders instead of obeying. And last—last, but most importantly to you—because I wish you beaten. Now, run, and tell Rosala each of these reasons so she will beat you well."

"Liandrin hears and obeys, High Lady," the da'covale whimpered, at last getting something right, and flung herself at the door so fast that she lost one of her white slippers. Too terrified to turn back for it, or perhaps even to notice—and well for her that she was—she clawed the door open and ran. Sending property for discipline should not bring a sense of satisfaction, but it did. Oh, yes, it did.

Suroth took a moment to control her breathing. To appear to be grieving was one thing, to appear to be agitated quite another. She was filled with annoyance at Liandrin, jolting memories of her nightmares, fears for Tuon's fate and even more so her own, but not until the face in the mirror displayed utter calm did she follow the da'covale.

The anteroom to her bedchamber was decorated in the garish Ebou Dari fashion, a cloud-painted blue ceiling, yellow walls and green and yellow floor tiles. Even replacing the furnishings with her own tall screens, all save two painted by the finest artists with birds or flowers, did little to relieve the gaudiness. She growled faintly in her throat at sight of the outer door, apparently left open by Liandrin in her flight, but she dismissed the da'covale from her mind for the moment and concentrated on the man who stood there examining the screen that held the image of a kori, a huge spotted cat from the Sen T'jore. Lanky and graying, in armor striped blue-and-yellow, he pivoted smoothly at the soft sound of her footsteps and went to one knee, though he was a commoner. The helmet beneath his arm bore three slender blue plumes, so the message must be important. Of course, it must be important to disturb her at this hour. She would give him dispensation. This once.

"Banner-General Mikhel Najirah, High Lady. Captain-General Galgan's compliments, and he has received communications from Tarabon."

Suroth's eyebrows climbed in spite of herself. Tarabon? Tarabon was as secure as Seandar. Automatically her fingers twitched, but she had not yet found a replacement for Alwhin. She must speak to the man herself. Irritation over that hardened her voice, and she made no effort to soften it. Kneeling instead of prostrate! "What communications? If I have been wakened for news of Aiel, I will not be pleased, Banner-General."

Her tone failed to intimidate the man. He even raised his eyes almost to meet hers. "Not Aiel, High Lady," he said calmly. "Captain-General Galgan wishes to tell you himself, so you can hear every detail correctly."

Suroth's breath caught for an instant. Whether Najirah was just reluctant to tell her the contents of these communications or had been ordered not to, this sounded ill. "Lead on," she commanded, then swept out of the room without waiting for him, ignoring as best she could the pair of Deathwatch Guards standing like statues in the hallway to either side of the door. The "honor" of being guarded by those men in red-and-green armor made her skin crawl. Since Tuon's disappearance, she tried not to see them at all.

The corridor, lined with gilded stand-lamps whose flames flickered in errant drafts that stirred tapestries of ships and the sea, was empty except for a few liveried palace servants, scurrying on early tasks, who thought deep bows and curtsies sufficient. And they always looked right at her! Perhaps a word with Beslan? No; the new King of Tarabon was her equal, now, in law at any rate, and she doubted that he would make his servants behave properly. She stared straight ahead as she walked. That way, she did not have to see the servants' insults.

Najirah caught up to her quickly, his boots ringing on the too-bright blue floor tiles, and fell in at her side. In truth, she needed no guide. She knew where Galgan must be.

The room had begun as a chamber for dancing, a square thirty paces on a side, its ceiling painted with fanciful fish and birds frolicking in often confusing fashion among clouds and waves. Only the ceiling remained to recall the room's beginnings. Now mirrored stand-lamps and shelves full of filed reports in leather folders lined the pale red walls. Brown-coated clerks scurried along the aisles between the long, map-strewn tables that covered the green-tiled dancing-floor. A young officer, an under-lieutenant with no plume on her red-and-yellow helmet, raced past Suroth without so much as a move to prostrate herself. Clerks merely squeezed themselves out of her path. Galgan gave his people too much leeway. He claimed that what he called excessive ceremony at "the wrong time" hindered efficiency; she called it effrontery.

Lunal Galgan, a tall man in a red robe richly worked with bright-feathered birds, the hair of his crest snow white and its tail plaited in a tight but untidy queue that hung to his shoulders, stood at a table near the center of the room with a knot of other high-ranking officers, some in breastplates, others in robes and nearly as disheveled as she. It seemed she was not the first to whom he had sent a messenger. She struggled to keep anger from her face. Galgan had come with Tuon and the Return, and thus she knew little of him beyond that his ancestors had been among the first to throw their support to Luthair Paendrag and that he owned a high reputation as a soldier and a general. Well, reputation and truth were sometimes the same. She disliked him entirely for himself.

He turned at her approach and formally laid his hands on her shoulders, kissing her on either cheek, so she was forced to return the greeting while trying not to wrinkle her nose at the strong, musky scent he favored. Galgan's face was as smooth as his creases would allow, but she thought she detected a hint of worry in his blue eyes. A number of the men and women behind him, mainly low Blood and commoners, wore open frowns.

The large map of Tarabon spread out on the table in front of her and held flat by four lamps gave reason enough for worry. Markers covered it, red wedges for Seanchan forces on the move and red stars for forces holding in place, each supporting a small paper banner inked with their numbers and composition. Scattered across the map, across the entire map, lay black discs marking engagements, and even more white discs for enemy forces, many of those without the banners. How could there be any enemies in Tarabon? It was as secure as....

“What happened?” she demanded.

“Raken began arriving with reports from Lieutenant-General Turan about three hours ago,” Galgan began in conversational tones. Pointedly not making a report himself. He studied the map as he talked, never glancing in her direction. “They aren’t complete—each new one adds to the lists, and I expect that won’t change for a while—but what I’ve seen runs this way. Since dawn yesterday, seven major supply camps overrun and burned, along with more than two dozen smaller camps. Twenty supply trains attacked, the wagons and their contents put to the torch. Seventeen small outposts have been wiped out, eleven patrols have failed to report in, and there have been an additional fifteen skirmishes. Also a few attacks against our settlers. Only a handful of fatalities, mostly men who tried to defend their belongings, but a good many wagons and stores burned along with some half-built houses, and the same message delivered everywhere. Leave Tarabon. All this was done by bands of between two and perhaps five hundred men. Estimates are a minimum of ten thousand and perhaps twice that, nearly all Taraboners. Oh, yes,” he finished casually, “and most of them are wearing armor painted with stripes.”

She wanted to grind her teeth. Galgan commanded the soldiers of the Return, yet she commanded the Corenne, the Forerunners, and as such, she possessed the higher rank in spite of his crest and red-lacquered fingernails. She suspected the only reason he did not claim that the Forerunners had been absorbed into the Return by its very arrival was that supplanting her meant assuming responsibility for Tuon’s safety. And for that apology, should it become necessary. “Dislike” was too mild a word. She loathed Galgan.

“A mutiny?” she said, proud of the coolness of her voice. Inside, she had begun to burn.

Galgan’s white queue swung slowly as he shook his head. “No. All reports say our Taraboners have fought well, and we’ve had a few successes, taken a few prisoners. Not one of them can be found on the rosters of loyal Taraboners. Several have been identified as Dragonsworn believed to be up in Arad Doman. And the name Rodel Ituralde has been mentioned a number of times as the brain behind it all, and the leader. A Domani. He’s supposed to be one of the best generals this side of the ocean, and if he planned and carried out all this,” he swept a hand over the map, “then I believe it.” The fool sounded admiring! “Not a mutiny. A raid on a grand scale. But he won’t get out with nearly as many men as he brought in.”

Dragonsworn. The word was like a fist clutching Suroth’s throat. “Are there Asha’man?”

“Those fellows who can channel?” Galgan grimaced and made a sign against evil, apparently unconscious of doing so. “There was no mention of them,” he said dryly, “and I rather think there would have been.”

Red-hot anger needed to erupt at Galgan, but screaming at another of the High Blood would lower her eyes. And, as bad, gain nothing. Still, it had to be directed somewhere. It had to come out. She was proud of what she had done in Tarabon, and now the country appeared to be halfway back to the chaos she found when she first landed there. And one man was to blame. “This Ituralde.” Her tone was ice. “I want his head!”

“Never fear,” Galgan murmured, folding his hands behind his back and bending to examine some of the small banners. “It won’t be long before Turan chases him back to Arad Doman with his tail between his legs, and with luck, he’ll be with one of the bands we snap up.”

“Luck?” she snapped. “I don’t trust to luck!” Her anger was open, now, and she did not consider trying to suppress it again. Her eyes scanned the map as though she could find Ituralde that way. “If Turan is hunting a hundred bands, as you suggest, he’ll need more scouts to run them down, and I want them run down. Every last one of them. Especially Ituralde. General Yulan, I want four in every five—no, nine in every ten—raken in Altara and Amadicia moved to Tarabon. If Turan can’t find them all with that, then he can see if his own head will appease me.”

Yulan, a dark little man in a blue robe embroidered with black-crested eagles, must have dressed in too great a hurry to apply the gum that normally held his wig in place, because he was constantly touching the thing to make sure it was straight. He was Captain of the Air for the Forerunners, but the Return’s Captain of the Air was only a Banner-General, a more senior man having died on the voyage. Yulan would have no trouble with him.

“A wise move, High Lady,” he said, frowning at the map, “but may I suggest leaving the raken in Amadicia and those assigned to Banner-General Khirgan. Raken are the best way we have to locate Aiel, and in two days we still haven’t found those Whitecloaks. That will still give General Turan—”

“The Aiel are less of a problem every day,” she told him firmly, “and a few deserters are nothing.” He inclined his head in assent, one hand keeping his wig in place. He was only low Blood, after all.

“I hardly call seven thousand men a few deserters,” Galgan murmured dryly.

“It shall be as I command!” she snapped. Curse those so-called Children of the Light! She still had not decided whether to make Asunawa and the few thousand who had remained da’covale. They had remained, yet how long before they offered betrayal, too? And Asunawa seemed to hate damane, of all things. The man was unbalanced!

Galgan shrugged, utterly unperturbed. A red-lacquered fingernail traced lines on the map as though he were planning movements of soldiers. "So long as you don't want the to'raken, too, I raise no objections. That plan must go forward. Altara is falling into our hands with barely a struggle, I'm not ready to move on Illian yet, and we need to pacify Tarabon again quickly. The people will turn against us if we can't give them safety."

Suroth began to regret letting her anger show. He would raise no objections? He was not ready for Illian yet? He was all but saying that he did not have to follow her orders, only not openly, not so he had to take her responsibility along with her authority.

"I expect this message to be sent to Turan, General Galgan." Her voice was steady, kept so by will alone. "He is to send me Rodel Ituralde's head if he has to hound the man across Arad Doman and into the Blight. And if he fails to send me that head, I will take his."

Galgan's mouth tightened briefly, and he frowned down at the map. "Turan sometimes needs a fire lit under him," he muttered, "and Arad Doman has always been next for him. Very well. Your message will be sent, Suroth."

She could stay no longer in the same room with him. Without a word, she left. Had she spoken, she would have screamed. She stalked all the way back to her rooms without bothering to mask her fury. The Deathwatch Guards took no notice, of course; they might as well have been carved of stone. Which made her slam the anteroom door behind her with a crash. Perhaps they noticed that!

Padding toward her bed, she kicked off her slippers, let the robe and sash fall to the floor. She must find Tuon. She had to. If only she could puzzle out Tuon's target, puzzle out where she was. If only—

Suddenly the walls of her bedchamber, the ceiling, even the floor, began to glow with a silvery light. Those surfaces seemed to have become light. Gaping in shock, she turned slowly, staring at the box of light that surrounded her, and found herself looking at a woman made of roiling flames, clothed in roiling flames. Almandaragal was on his feet, awaiting his owner's command to attack.

"I am Semirhage," the woman of fire said in a voice like a tolling funeral gong.

"Belly, Almandaragal!" That command, taught as a child because it amused her to have the lopar prostrate himself before her, ended with a grunt because she obeyed it herself even as she gave it. Kissing the red-and-green-patterned carpet, she said, "I live to serve and obey, Great Mistress." There was no doubt in her mind that this woman was who she said. Who would dare claim that name falsely? Or could appear as living fire?

"I think you would also like to rule." The tolling gong sounded faintly amused, but then it hardened. "Look at me! I dislike the way you Seanchan avoid meeting my eyes. It makes

me believe you are hiding something. You don't want to try hiding anything from me, Suroth."

"Of course, not, Great Mistress," Suroth said, pushing herself up to sit on her heels. "Never, Great Mistress." She raised her gaze as far as the other woman's mouth, but she could not make herself raise it higher. Surely that would be enough.

"Better," Semirhage murmured. "Now. How would you like to rule in these lands? A handful of deaths—Galgan and a few others—and you could manage to name yourself Empress, with my help. It's hardly important, but circumstances provide the opportunity, and you would certainly be more amenable than the current Empress has been so far."

Suroth's stomach clenched. She feared she might vomit. "Great Mistress," she said dully, "the penalty for that is to be taken before the true Empress, may she live forever, and have your entire skin removed, great care being taken to keep you alive. After that—"

"Inventive, if primitive," Semirhage broke in wryly. "But of no account. The Empress Radhanan is dead. Remarkable how much blood there is in a human body. Enough to cover the whole Crystal Throne. Take the offer, Suroth. I will not make it again. You will make certain matters slightly more convenient, but not enough for me to put myself out a second time."

Suroth had to make herself breathe. "Then Tuon is the Empress, may she live...." Tuon would take a new name, rarely to be spoken outside the Imperial family. The Empress was the Empress, might she live forever. Wrapping her arms around herself, Suroth began to sob, shaking beyond her ability to stop. Almandaragal lifted his head and whined at her interrogatively.

Semirhage laughed, the music of deep gongs. "Grief for Radhanan, Suroth, or is your dislike of Tuon becoming Empress so deep?"

Haltingly, in spurts of three or four words broken by unmanageable weeping, Suroth explained. As the proclaimed heir, Tuon had become Empress the moment her mother died. Except, if her mother had been assassinated, then it must have been arranged by one of her sisters, which meant that Tuon herself was surely dead. And none of that made the slightest difference. The forms would be carried out. She would have to return to Seandar and apologize for Tuon's death, for the death of an Empress, now, to the very woman who had arranged it. Who would, of course, not take the throne until Tuon's death was announced. She could not bring herself to admit that she would kill herself first; it was too shaming to say aloud. Words died as howling sobs racked her. She did not want to die. She had been promised she would live forever!

This time, Semirhage's laughter was so shocking that it shut off Suroth's tears. That head of fire was thrown back, emitting great peals of mirth. At last she regained control, wiping away tears of flame with fiery fingers. "I see I didn't make myself clear. Radhanan is dead, and her daughters, and her sons, and half the Imperial Court, as well.

There is no Imperial family except for Tuon. There is no Empire. Seandar is in the hands of rioters and looters, and so are a dozen other cities. At least fifty nobles are contending for the throne, with armies in the field. There is war from the Aldael Mountains to Salaking. Which is why you will be perfectly safe in disposing of Tuon and proclaiming yourself Empress. I've even arranged for a ship, which should arrive soon, to bring word of the disaster." She laughed again, and said something strange. "Let the lord of chaos rule."

Suroth gaped at the other woman in spite of herself. The Empire...destroyed? Semirhage had killed the...? Assassination was not unknown among the Blood, High or low, nor within the Imperial family, yet for anyone else to reach inside the Imperial family in that way was horrifying, unthinkable. Even one of the Da'concion, the Chosen Ones. But to become Empress herself, even here. She felt dizzy, with a hysterical desire to laugh. She could complete the cycle, conquering these lands, and then send armies to reclaim Seanchan. With an effort, she managed to regain possession of herself.

"Great Mistress, if Tuon really is alive, then...then killing her will be difficult." She had to force those words out. To kill the Empress.... Even thinking it was difficult. To become Empress. Her head felt as if it might float off her shoulders. "She will have her sul'dam and damane with her, and some of her Deathwatch Guards." Difficult? Killing her would be impossible in those circumstances. Unless Semirhage could be induced to do it herself. Six damane might well be dangerous even to her. Besides, there was a saying among commoners. The mighty tell the lesser to dig in the mud and keep their own hands clean. She had heard it by chance, and punished the man who spoke it, but it was true.

"Think, Suroth!" The gongs rang strong, imperative. "Captain Musenge and the others would have gone the same night Tuon and her maid left if they had had any inkling of what she was about. They are looking for her. You must put every effort into finding her first, but if that fails, her Deathwatch Guards will be less protection than they seem. Every soldier in your army has heard that at least some of the Guards are involved with an impostor. The general feeling seems to be that the impostor and anyone connected to her should be torn apart bodily and the pieces buried in a dungheap. Quietly." Lips of fire curled in a small, amused smile. "To avoid the shame to the Empire."

It might be possible. A party of Deathwatch Guards would be easy to locate. She would need to find out exactly how many Musenge had taken with him, and send Elbar with fifty for every one. No, a hundred, to account for the damane. And then.... "Great Mistress, you understand I am reluctant to proclaim anything until I am certain Tuon is dead?"

"Of course," Semirhage said. The gongs were amused once more. "But remember, if Tuon manages to return safely, it will matter little to me, so don't dally."

"I will not, Great Mistress. I intend to become Empress, and for that I must kill the Empress." This time, saying it was not very hard at all.

In Pevara's estimation, Tsutama Rath's rooms were flamboyant beyond the point of extravagance, and her own beginnings as a butcher's daughter played no part in her opinion. The sitting room simply put her on edge. Beneath a cornice carved with swallows in flight and gilded, the walls held two large silk tapestries, one displaying bright red bloodroses, the other a calma bush covered in scarlet blossoms larger than her two hands together. The tables and chairs were delicate pieces, if you ignored sufficient carving and gilding for any throne. The stand-lamps were heavily gilded, too, and the mantel, worked with running horses, above the red-streaked marble fireplace. Several of the tables held red Sea Folk porcelain, the rarest, four vases and six bowls, a small fortune in themselves, as well as any number of jade or ivory carvings, none small, and one figure of a dancing woman, a hand tall, that appeared be carved from a ruby. A gratuitous display of wealth, and she knew for a fact that aside from the gilded barrel-clock on the mantel, there was another in Tsutama's bedroom and even one in her dressing room. Three clocks! That went far beyond flamboyant, never mind gilding or rubies.

And yet, the room suited the woman seated across from her and Javindhra. "Flamboyant" was exactly the word for her appearance. Tsutama was a strikingly beautiful woman, her hair caught in a fine golden net, with firedrops thick at her throat and ears and dressed as always in crimson silk that molded her full bosom, today with golden scrollwork embroidery to increase the emphasis. You might almost think she wanted to attract men, if you did not know her. Tsutama had made her dislike of men well known long before being sent into exile; she would have given mercy to a rabid dog before a man.

Back then, she had been hammer-hard, yet many had thought her a broken reed when she returned to the Tower. For a while, they had. Then everyone who spent any time near her realized that those shifting eyes were far from nervous. Exile had changed her, only not toward softness. Those eyes belonged on a hunting cat, searching for enemies or prey. The rest of Tsutama's face was not so much serene as it was still, an unreadable mask. Unless you pushed her to open anger, at least. Even then her voice would remain as calm as smooth ice, though. An unnerving combination.

"I heard disturbing rumors this morning about the battle at Dumai's Wells," she said abruptly. "Bloody disturbing." She had the habits now of long silences, no small talk, and sudden, unexpected statements. Exile had coarsened her language, too. The isolated farm she had been confined to must have been...vivid. "Including that three of the dead sisters were from our Ajah. Mother's milk in a cup!" All delivered in the most even tones. But her eyes stabbed at them accusingly.

Pevara took that gaze in stride. Any direct look from Tsutama seemed accusing, and on edge or not, Pevara knew better than to let the Highest see it. The woman swooped on weakness like a falcon. "I can't see why Katherine would disobey your orders to keep her knowledge to herself, and you cannot believe Tarna is likely to put discredit on Elaida." Not publicly, at any rate. Tarna guarded her feelings on Elaida as carefully as a cat

guarded a mousehole. “But sisters do get reports from their eyes-and-ears. We can’t stop them learning what happened. I’m surprised it’s taken this long.”

“That’s so,” Javindhra added, smoothing her skirts. The angular woman wore no jewelry aside from the Great Serpent ring, and her dress was unadorned, and a red deep enough to appear near black. “Sooner or later, the facts will all come out if we work till our fingers bleed.” Her mouth was so tight she seemed to be biting something, yet she sounded almost satisfied. Odd, that. She was Elaida’s lapdog.

Tsutama’s stare focused on her, and after a moment a flush grew on Javindhra’s cheeks. Perhaps as an excuse to break eye contact, she took a long drink of her tea. From a cup of beaten gold worked with leopards and deer, of course, Tsutama being as she now was. The Highest continued to stare silently, but whether at Javindhra or something beyond her, Pevara could no longer say.

When Katherine brought word that Galina was among the dead at Dumai’s Wells, Tsutama had been raised to replace her by near acclamation. She had possessed a very good reputation as a Sitter, at least before her involvement in the disgusting events that led to her downfall, and many in the Red believed the times called for as hard a Highest as could be found. Galina’s death had lifted a great weight from Pevara’s shoulders—the Highest, a Darkfriend; oh, that had been agony!—yet she was uncertain about Tsutama. There was something...wild...about her, now. Something unpredictable. Was she entirely sane? But then, the same question could be asked regarding the whole White Tower. How many of the sisters were entirely sane, now?

As if sensing her thoughts, Tsutama shifted that unblinking gaze to her. It did not make Pevara color or start, as it did so many besides Javindhra, but she did find herself wishing Duhara were there, just to give the Highest a third Sitter to stare at, just to share them out. She wished she knew where the woman had gone and why, with a rebel army camped outside Tar Valon. Over a week ago, Duhara had simply taken ship without a word to anyone, so far as Pevara was aware, and no one seemed to know whether she had gone north or south. These days, Pevara was suspicious of everyone and nearly everything.

“Did you call us here because of something in that letter, Highest?” she said at last. She met that unsettling stare levelly, yet she was beginning to want a long pull from her own ornate cup, and she wished it held wine rather than tea. Deliberately she rested the cup on the narrow arm of her chair. The other woman’s gaze made her feel as though spiders were crawling on her skin.

After a very long moment, Tsutama’s eyes dropped to the folded letter in her lap. Only her hand held it from rolling up into a little cylinder. It was on the very thin paper used for messages sent by pigeon, and the small inked letters clearly visible through the page appeared to cover it densely.

“This is from Sashalle Anderly,” she said, bringing a wince of pity from Pevara and a grunt that might have been anything from Javindhra. Poor Sashalle. Tsutama continued

without any outward sign of sympathy, though. “The bloody woman believes Galina escaped, because it is addressed to her. Much of what she writes merely confirms what we already know from other sources, including Toveine. But, without naming them, she bloody well says that she is ‘in charge of most of the sisters in the city of Cairhien.’”

“How can Sashalle be in charge of any sisters?” Javindhra shook her head, her expression denying the possibility. “Could she have gone insane?”

Pevara held her silence. Tsutama gave answers when she wished, rarely when you asked. Toveine’s earlier letter, also addressed to Galina, had not mentioned Sashalle at all, or the other two, but of course, she would have found the entire subject beyond distasteful. Even thinking of it was like eating rotten plums. Most of her words had been devoted to laying the whole blame for events at Elaida’s feet, however indirectly.

Tsutama’s eyes flickered toward Javindhra like dagger thrusts, but she went on without pausing. “Sashalle recounts Toveine’s bloody visit to Cairhien with the other sisters and the flaming Asha’man, though she clearly doesn’t know about the bloody bonding. She found it all very strange, sisters mingling with those goat-kissing men on ‘tense yet often friendly’ terms. Blood and bloody ashes! That is how she puts it, burn me.” Tsutama’s tone, suitable for discussing the price of lace, in strong contrast to the intensity of her eyes, and her language, gave no hint of what she felt on the subject. “Sashalle says that when they left, they took flaming Warders belonging to sisters she believes are with the boy, so it seems bloody certain they were looking for him and likely have found him by now. She has no idea why. But she confirms what Toveine claimed concerning Logain. Apparently, the goat-spawned man is no longer gentled.”

“Impossible,” Javindhra muttered into her teacup, but softly. Tsutama disliked having her statements challenged. Pevara kept her opinions to herself and sipped from her own cup. So far, there seemed nothing in the letter worthy of discussion except how Sashalle could be “in charge” of anything, and she would rather think of anything other than Sashalle’s fate. The tea tasted of blueberries. How had Tsutama obtained blueberries this early in the spring? Perhaps they had been dried.

“I will read the rest to you,” Tsutama said, unfolding the page and scanning almost to the bottom before beginning. Apparently Sashalle had been very detailed. What was the Highest not sharing? So many suspicions.

I have been so long without communicating because I could not work out how to say what I must, but now I see that simply telling the facts is the only way. Along with a number of other sisters, who I will leave to decide for themselves whether to reveal what I am about to, I have sworn an oath of fealty to the Dragon Reborn which is to last until Tarmon Gai’don has been fought.

Javindhra gasped loudly, her eyes popping, but Pevara merely whispered, “Ta’veren.” It must be that. Ta’veren had always been her explanation for most of the disturbing rumors out of Cairhien.

Tsutama read on right over them.

What I do, I do for the good of the Red Ajah and the good of the Tower. Should you disagree, I will surrender myself for your discipline. After Tarmon Gai'don. As you may have heard, Irgain Fatamed, Ronaille Vevanios and I were all stilled when the Dragon Reborn escaped at Dumai's Wells. We have been Healed, however, by a man named Damer Flinn, one of the Asha'man, and we all seem to be restored fully. Unlikely as this seems, I swear beneath the Light and by my hope of salvation and rebirth that it is true. I look forward to my eventual return to the Tower, where I will retake the Three Oaths to reaffirm my dedication to my Ajah and to the Tower.

Folding the letter again, she gave her head a small shake. "There's more, but it's all more bloody pleading that what she's doing is for the Ajah and the Tower." A glitter in her eyes suggested that Sashalle might come to regret surviving the Last Battle.

"If Sashalle truly has been Healed," Pevara began, and could not go on. She wet her lips with tea, then raised the cup again and took a mouthful. The possibility seemed too wonderful to hope for, a snowflake that might melt at a touch.

"This is impossible," Javindhra growled, though not very strongly. Even so, she directed the comment to Pevara lest the Highest think it meant for her. A deep scowl made her face harsher. "Gentling cannot be Healed. Stilling cannot be Healed. Sheep will fly first! Sashalle must be delusional."

"Toveine might be mistaken," Tsutama said, in a very strong voice, "though if she is, I can't see why these flaming Asha'man would let Logain be one of them, much less command, but I hardly think Sashalle could be bloody mistaken about herself. And she doesn't write like a woman having flaming delusions. Sometimes what is bloody impossible is only bloody impossible until the first woman does it. So. Stilling has been Healed. By a man. Those toad-spawned Seanchan locusts are chaining every woman they find who can channel, apparently including a number of sisters. Twelve days past.... Well, you know what happened as bloody well as I. The world has become a more dangerous place than at any time since the Trolloc Wars, perhaps since the Breaking itself. Therefore I've decided we will move forward with your scheme for these flaming Asha'man, Pevara. Distasteful and hazardous, yet burn me, there is no bloody choice. You and Javindhra will arrange it together."

Pevara winced. Not for the Seanchan. They were human, whatever strange ter'angreal they possessed, and they would be defeated eventually. Mention of what the Forsaken had done twelve days ago brought a grimace, though, despite her efforts at keeping a smooth face. So much of the Power wielded in one place could have been no one else. To the extent she could, she avoided thinking about that or what they might have been trying to accomplish. Or worse, what they might have accomplished. A second wince came at hearing the proposal to bond Asha'man named as hers. But that had been inevitable from the moment she presented Tarna's suggestion to Tsutama, while holding her breath against the eruption she was sure would come. She had even used the argument of

increasing the size of linked circles by including men, against that monstrous display of the Power. Surprisingly, there had been no eruption, and small reaction of any kind. Tsutama merely said she would think on it, and insisted on having the relevant papers about men and circles delivered to her from the Library. The third wince, the largest, was for having to work with Javindhra, for being saddled with the job at all. She had more than enough on her plate at the moment, besides which, working with Javindhra was always painful. The woman argued against anything put forward by anyone save herself. Nearly anything.

Javindhra had been vehemently against bonding Asha'man, horrified at the notion of Red sisters bonding anyone almost as much as at bonding men who could channel, yet now that the Highest had commanded it, she was stymied. Still, she found a way to argue against. "Elaida will never allow it," she muttered.

Tsutama's glittering eyes caught her gaze and held it. The bony woman swallowed audibly.

"Elaida will not know until it is too late, Javindhra. I hide her secrets—the disaster against the Black Tower, Dumai's Wells—as best I can because she was raised from the Red, but she is the Amyrlin Seat, of all Ajahs and none. That means she is no longer Red, and this is Ajah business, not hers." A dangerous tone entered her voice. And she had not cursed once. That meant she was on the edge of open fury. "Do you disagree with me on this? Do you intend to inform Elaida despite my express wishes?"

"No, Highest," Javindhra replied quickly, then buried her face in her cup. Strangely, she seemed to be hiding a smile.

Pevara contented herself with shaking her head. If it had to be done, and she was certain it must, then clearly Elaida had to be kept in the dark. What did Javindhra have to smile about? Too many suspicions.

"I'm very glad that you both agree with me," Tsutama said dryly, leaning back in her chair. "Now, leave me."

They paused only to set down their cups and curtsy. In the Red, when the Highest spoke, everyone obeyed, including Sitters. The sole exception, by Ajah law, was voting in the Hall, though some women who held the title had managed to ensure that any vote near to their hearts went as they wished. Pevara was certain Tsutama intended to be one such. The struggle was going to be distinctly unpleasant. She only hoped she could give as good as she got.

In the corridor outside, Javindhra muttered something about correspondence and rushed off down the white floor tiles marked with the red Flame of Tar Valon before Pevara could say a word. Not that she had intended to say anything, but surely as peaches were poison, the woman was going to drag her heels in this and leave the whole matter in her lap. Light, but this was the last thing she needed, at the worst possible time.

Pausing at her own rooms only long enough to gather her long-fringed shawl and check the hour—a quarter of an hour to noon; she was almost disappointed that her one clock agreed with Tsutama's; clocks frequently did not—she left the Red quarters and hurried deeper into the Tower, down into the common areas below the quarters. The wide hallways were well lighted with mirrored stand-lamps but almost empty of people, which made them seem cavernous and the frieze-banded white walls stark. The occasional rippling of a bright tapestry in a draft had an eerie feel, as though the silk or wool had taken on life. The few people she saw were serving men and women with the Flame of Tar Valon on their chests, scurrying along about their chores and barely pausing long enough to offer hurried courtesies. They kept their eyes lowered. With the Ajahs separated into all but warring camps, fetid tension and antagonism filled the Tower, and the mood had infected the servants. Frightened them, at least.

She could not be sure, but she thought fewer than two hundred sisters remained in the Tower, most keeping to their Ajah quarters except for necessity, so she really did not expect to see another sister strolling. When Adelorna Bastine glided up the short stairs from a crossing corridor almost right in front of her, she was so surprised she gave a start. Adelorna, who made slimness appear stately despite her lack of height, walked on without acknowledging Pevara in any way. The Saldaean woman wore her shawl, too—no sister was seen outside her Ajah quarters without her shawl, now—and was followed by her three Warders. Short and tall, wide and lean, they wore their swords, and their eyes never ceased moving. Warders wearing swords and plainly guarding their Aes Sedai's back, in the Tower. That was all too common, yet Pevara could have wept at it. Only, there were too many reasons for weeping to settle on one; instead she set about solving what she could.

Tsutama could command Reds to bond Asha'man, command them not to go running to Elaida, but it seemed best to begin with sisters who might be willing to entertain the notion without being ordered, especially with rumors spreading of three Red sisters dead at Asha'man hands. Tarna Feir had already entertained it, so a very private conversation with her was in order. She might know others of a like mind. The greatest difficulty would be approaching the Asha'man with the idea. They were very unlikely to agree just because they themselves had already bonded fifty-one sisters. Light of the world, fifty-one! Broaching the subject would require a sister who possessed diplomacy and a way with words. And iron nerve. She was still mulling over names when she saw the woman she had come to meet, already at the appointed place, apparently studying a tall tapestry.

Tiny and willowy, and regal in her pale silver silk with a slightly darker lace at her neck and wrists, Yukiri appeared thoroughly engrossed in the tapestry and quite at her ease. Pevara could only recall seeing her the slightest bit flustered on one occasion, and putting Talene to the question had been nerve-racking for everyone there. Yukiri was alone, of course, though of late she had been heard to say she was thinking of taking a Warder again. Doubtless that was equal parts the current times and their own present situation. Pevara could have done with a Warder or two herself.

“Is there any truth in this, or is it all the weaver’s fancy?” she asked, joining the smaller woman. The tapestry showed a long-ago battle against Trollocs, or was purported to. Most such things were made long after the fact, and the weavers usually went by hearsay. This one was old enough to need the protection of a warding to keep it from falling apart.

“I know as much about tapestries as a pig knows about blacksmithing, Pevara.” For all her elegance, Yukiri seldom let long pass without revealing her country origins. The silvery gray fringe of her shawl swung as she gathered it around her. “You’re late, so let’s be brief. I feel like a hen being watched by a fox. Marris broke this morning, and I gave her the oath of obedience myself, but as with the others, her ‘one other’ is out of the Tower. With the rebels, I think.” She fell silent as a pair of serving women approached up the hallway carrying a large wicker laundry basket with neatly folded bed linens bulging from the top.

Pevara sighed. It had seemed so encouraging, at the start. Terrifying and nearly overwhelming, too, yet they had appeared to be making a good beginning. Talene had only known the name of one other Black sister actually in the Tower at present, but once Atuan had been kidnapped—Pevara would have liked to think of it as an arrest, yet she could not when they seemed to be violating half of Tower Law and a good many strong customs besides—once Atuan was safely in hand, she had soon been induced to surrender the names of her heart: Karale Sanghir, a Domani Gray, and Marris Thornhill, an Andoran Brown. Only Karale among them had a Warder, though he had turned out to be a Darkfriend, too. Luckily, soon after learning that his Aes Sedai had betrayed him, he had managed to take poison in the basement room where he had been confined while Karale was questioned. Strange to think of that as lucky, but the Oath Rod only worked on those who could channel, and they were too few to guard and tend prisoners.

It had been such a bright beginning, however fraught, and now they were at an impasse unless one of the others returned to the Tower, back to searching for discrepancies between what sisters claimed to have done and what it could be proven they actually had, something made harder by the inclination of most sisters to be oblique in nearly everything. Of course, Talene and the other three would pass along whatever they knew, whatever came into their hands—the oath of obedience took care of that—but any message very much more important than “take this and put it in that place” would be in a cipher known only to the woman who sent it and the woman it was directed to. Some were protected by a weave that made the ink vanish if the wrong hand broke the seal; that could be done with so little of the Power it might go unnoticed unless you were looking for it, and there appeared to be no way to circumvent the ward. If they were not at an impasse, then their flow of success was reduced to a creeping trickle. And always there was the danger that the hunted would learn of them and become the hunters. Invisible hunters, for all practical purposes, just as they now seemed invisible prey.

Still, they had four names plus four sisters in hand who would admit they were Darkfriends, though likely Marris would be as quick as the other three to claim she now rejected the Shadow, repented of her sins, and embraced the Light once more. Enough to convince anyone. Supposedly, the Black Ajah knew everything that passed in Elaida’s

study, yet it might be worth the risk. Pevara refused to believe Talene's claim that Elaida was a Darkfriend. After all, she had initiated the hunt. The Amyrlin Seat could rouse the entire Tower. Perhaps a revelation that the Black Ajah truly existed might do what the appearance of the rebels with an army had failed to, stop the Ajahs from hissing at one another like strange cats and bind them back together. The Tower's wounds called for desperate remedies.

The serving women passed beyond earshot, and Pevara was about to bring up the suggestion when Yukiri spoke again.

"Last night, Talene received an order to appear tonight before their 'Supreme Council.'" Her mouth twisted around the words in distaste. "It seems that happens only if you're being honored or given a very, very important assignment. Or if you're to be put to the question." Her lips almost writhed. What they had learned about the Black Ajah's means of putting someone to the question was as nauseating as it was incredible. Forcing a woman into a circle against her will? Guiding a circle to inflict pain? Pevara felt her stomach writhing. "Talene doesn't think she's to be honored or given an assignment," Yukiri went on, "so she begged to be hidden away. Saerin put her in a room in the lowest basement. Talene may be wrong, but I agree with Saerin. Risking it would be letting a dog into the chicken yard and hoping for the best."

Pevara stared up at the tapestry stretching well above their heads. Armored men swung swords and axes, stabbed spears and halberds at huge, man-like shapes with boars' snouts and wolves' snouts, with goats' horns and rams' horns. The weaver had seen Trollocs. Or accurate drawings. Men fought alongside the Trollocs, too. Darkfriends. Sometimes, fighting the Shadow required spilling blood. And desperate remedies.

"Let Talene go to this meeting," she said. "We'll all go. They won't expect us. We can kill or capture them and decapitate the Black at a stroke. This Supreme Council must know the names of all of them. We can destroy the whole Black Ajah."

Lifting an edge of the fringe on Pevara's shawl with a slim hand, Yukiri frowned at it ostentatiously. "Yes, red. I thought it might have turned green when I wasn't looking. There will be thirteen of them, you know. Even if some of this 'Council' are out of the Tower, the rest will bring in sisters to make up the number."

"I know," Pevara replied impatiently. Talene had been a fount of information, most of it useless and much of it horrifying, almost more than they could take in. "We take everyone. We can order Zerah and the others to fight alongside us, and even Talene and that lot. They'll do as they're told." In the beginning, she had been uneasy about that oath of obedience, but over time you could become accustomed to anything.

"So, nineteen of us against thirteen of them," Yukiri mused, sounding much too patient. Even the way she adjusted her shawl radiated patience. "Plus whoever they have watching to make sure their meeting isn't disturbed. Thieves are always the most careful of their purses." That had the irritating sound of an old saying. "Best to call the numbers

even at best, and probably favoring them. How many of us die in return for killing or capturing how many of them? More importantly, how many of them escape? Remember, they meet hooded. If just one escapes, then we won't know who she is, but she'll know us, and soon enough, the whole Black Ajah will know, too. It sounds to me less like chopping off a chicken's head than like trying to wrestle a leopard in the dark."

Pevara opened her mouth, then closed it without speaking. Yukiri was right. She should have tallied the numbers and reached the same conclusion herself. But she wanted to strike out, at something, at anything, and small wonder. The head of her Ajah might be insane; she was tasked with arranging for Reds, who by ancient custom bonded no one, to bond not just any men, but Asha'man; and the hunt for Darkfriends in the Tower had reached a stone wall. Strike out? She wanted to bite holes through bricks.

She thought their meeting was at an end—she had come only to learn how matters progressed with Marris, and a bitter harvest that had turned out—but Yukiri touched her arm. "Walk with me awhile. We've been here too long, and I want to ask you something." Nowadays, Sitters of different Ajahs standing together too long made rumors of plots sprout like mushrooms after rain. For some reason, talking while walking seemed to cause many fewer. It made no sense, but there it was.

Yukiri took her time getting to her question. The floor tiles turned from green-and-blue to yellow-and-brown as they walked along one of the main corridors that spiraled gently through the Tower, down five floors without seeing anyone else, before she spoke. "Has the Red heard from anyone who went with Toveine?"

Pevara almost tripped over her own slippers. She should have expected it, though. Toveine would not have been the only one to write from Cairhien. "From Toveine herself," she said, and told almost everything that had been in Toveine's letter. Under the circumstances, there was nothing else she could do. She did hold back the accusations against Elaida, and also how long ago the letter had arrived. The one was still Ajah business, she hoped, while the other might require awkward explanations.

"We heard from Akoure Vayet." Yukiri walked a few paces in silence, then muttered, "Blood and bloody ashes!"

Pevara's eyebrows rose in shock. Yukiri was often earthy, but never vulgar before this. She noted that the other woman had not said when Akoure's letter arrived, either. Had the Gray received other letters from Cairhien, from sisters who had sworn to the Dragon Reborn? She could not ask. They trusted one another with their lives in this hunt, and still, Ajah business was Ajah business. "What do you intend doing with the information?"

"We will keep silent for the good of the Tower. Only the Sitters and the head of our Ajah know. Evanellein is for pulling Elaida down because of this, but that can't be allowed now. With the Tower to mend and the Seanchan and Asha'man to be dealt with, perhaps never." She did not sound happy over that.

Pevara stifled her irritation. She could not like Elaida, yet you did not have to like the Amyrlin Seat. Any number of very unlikeable women had worn the stole and done well for the Tower. But could sending fifty-one sisters into captivity be called doing well? Could Dumai's Wells, with four sisters dead and more than twenty delivered into another sort of captivity, to a ta'veren? No matter. Elaida was Red—had been Red—and far too long had passed since a Red gained the stole and staff. All the rash actions and ill-considered decisions seemed things of the past since the rebels appeared, and saving the Tower from the Black Ajah would redeem her failures.

That was not how she put it, of course. "She began the hunt, Yukiri; she deserves to finish it. Light, everything we've uncovered so far has come by chance, and we are at a full stop. We need the authority of the Amyrlin Seat behind us if we're to get any further."

"I don't know," the other woman said, wavering. "All four of them say the Black knows everything that happens in Elaida's study." She bit at her lip and shrugged uncomfortably. "Perhaps if we can meet her alone, away from her study—"

"There you are. I've been looking everywhere."

Pevara turned calmly at the sudden voice behind them, but Yukiri gave a start and muttered something pungent almost under her breath. If she kept this up, she would be as bad as Doesine. Or Tsutama.

Seaine hurried down to them with the fringe of her shawl swinging and her thick black eyebrows rising in surprise at Yukiri's glare. How like a White, logical in everything and often blind to the world around them. Half the time, Seaine seemed unaware they were in any danger at all.

"You were looking for us?" Yukiri almost growled, planting her fists on her hips. Despite her diminutive size, she gave a good impression of fierce looming. Doubtless part of that was for being startled, but she still believed Seaine should be guarded closely for her own protection, no matter what Saerin had decided, and here the woman was, out and about alone.

"For you, for Saerin, for anyone," Seaine replied calmly. Her earlier fears, that the Black Ajah might know what work Elaida had assigned her, were quite gone. Her blue eyes held warmth, yet otherwise she was back to being the prototypical White, a woman of icy serenity. "I have urgent news," she said as though it were anything but. "The lesser is this. This morning I saw a letter from Ayako Norsoni that arrived several days ago. From Cairhien. She and Toveine and all the others have been captured by the Asha'man and...." Tilting her head to one side, she studied them in turn. "You aren't surprised in the slightest. Of course. You've seen letters, too. Well, there's nothing to be done about it now, anyway."

Pevara exchanged looks with Yukiri, then said, "This is the less urgent, Seaine?"

The White Sitter's composure faded into worry, tightening her mouth and creasing the corners of her eyes. Her hands tightened into fists gripping her shawl. "For us, it is. I've just come from answering a summons to Elaida. She wanted to know how I was getting on." Seaine took a deep breath. "With discovering proof that Alviarin entered a treasonous correspondence with the Dragon Reborn. Really, she was so circumspect in the beginning, so indirect, it's no wonder I misunderstood what she wanted."

"I think that fox is walking on my grave," Yukiri murmured.

Pevara nodded. The notion of approaching Elaida had vanished like summer dew. Their one assurance that Elaida was not herself Black Ajah had been that she instigated the hunt for them, but since she had done no such thing.... At least the Black Ajah remained in ignorance of them. At least they had that, still. But for how much longer?

"On mine, too," she said softly.

Alviarin glided along the corridors of the lower Tower with an outward air of serenity that she held on to hard. Night seemed to cling to the walls despite the mirrored stand-lamps, the ghosts of shadows dancing where none should be. Imagination, surely, yet they danced on the edges of vision. The hallways were very nearly empty, though the second sitting of supper had just ended. Most sisters preferred to have food brought up to their rooms, these days, but the hardier and the more defiant ventured to the dining halls from time to time, and a handful still took many of their meals below. She would not risk sisters seeing her appear flustered or hurried; she refused to let them believe she was scuttling about furtively. In truth, she disliked anyone looking at her at all. Outwardly calm, she seethed inside.

Abruptly she realized that she was fingering the spot on her forehead where Shaidar Haran had touched her. Where the Great Lord himself had marked her as his. Hysteria bubbled almost to the surface with that thought, but she maintained a smooth face by sheer will and gathered her white silk skirts slightly. That should keep her hands occupied. The Great Lord had marked her. Best not to think on that. But how to avoid it? The Great Lord.... On the outside she displayed absolute composure, but within was a swirling tangle of mortification and hatred and very near to gibbering terror. The external calm was what mattered, though. And there was a seed of hope. That mattered, too. An odd thing to think of as hopeful, yet she would hang on to anything that might keep her alive.

Stopping in front of a tapestry that showed a woman wearing an elaborate crown kneeling to some long-ago Amyrlin, she pretended to examine it while glancing quickly to left and right. Aside from her, the corridor remained as barren of life as an abandoned tomb. Her hand darted behind the edge of the tapestry, and in an instant she was walking on again, clutching a folded message. A miracle that it had reached her so quickly. The paper seemed to burn her palm, but she could not read it here. At a measured pace, she climbed

reluctantly to the White Ajah quarters. Calm and unfazed by anything, on the outside. The Great Lord had marked her. Other sisters were going to look at her.

The White was the smallest of the Ajahs, and barely more than twenty of its sisters were in the Tower at present, yet it seemed that nearly all of them were out in the main hallway. The walk along the plain white floor tiles seemed like running a gauntlet.

Seaine and Ferane were heading out despite the hour, shawls draped along their arms, and Seaine gave her a small smile of commiseration, which made her want to kill the Sitter, always thrusting her sharp nose in where it was unwanted. Ferane held no sympathy. She scowled with more open fury than any sister should have allowed herself to show. All Alviarin could do was try to ignore the copper-skinned woman without being obvious. Short and stout, with her usually mild round face and an ink smudge on her nose, Ferane was no one's image of a Domani, but the First Reasoner possessed a fierce Domani temper. She was quite capable of handing down a penance for any slight, especially to a sister who had "disgraced" both herself and the White.

The Ajah felt keenly the shame of her having been stripped of the Keeper's stole. Most felt anger at the loss of influence, as well. There were far too many glares, some from sisters who stood far enough below her that they should leap to obey if she gave a command. Others deliberately turned their backs.

She made her way through those frowns and snubs at a steady pace, unhurried, yet she felt her cheeks beginning to heat. She tried to immerse herself in the soothing nature of the White quarters. The plain white walls, lined with silvered stand-mirrors, held only a few simple tapestries, images of snowcapped mountains, shady forests, stands of bamboo with sunlight slanting through them. Ever since attaining the shawl she had used those images to help her find serenity in times of stress. The Great Lord had marked her. She clutched her skirts in fists to hold her hands at her sides. The message seemed to burn her hand. A steady, measured pace.

Two of the sisters she passed ignored her simply because they did not see her. Astrelle and Tesan were discussing food spoilage. Arguing, rather, faces smooth but eyes heated and voices on the brink of heat. They were arithmetists, of all things, as if logic could be reduced to numbers, and they seemed to be disagreeing on how those numbers were used.

"Calculating with Radun's Standard of Deviation, the rate is eleven times what it should be," Astrelle said in tight tones. "Furthermore, this must indicate the intervention of the Shadow—"

Tesan cut her off, beaded braids clicking as she shook her head. "The Shadow, yes, but Radun's Standard, it is outdated. You must use Covanen's First Rule of Medians, and calculate separately for rotting meat or rotten. The correct answers, as I said, are thirteen and nine. I have not yet applied it to the flour or the beans and the lentils, but it seems intuitively obvious—"

Astrelle swelled up, and since she was a plump woman with a formidable bosom, she could swell impressively. “Covanen’s First Rule?” she practically spluttered, breaking in. “That hasn’t been properly proven yet. Correct and proven methods are always preferable to slipshod....”

Alviarin very nearly smiled as she moved on. So someone had finally noticed that the Great Lord had laid his hand on the Tower. But knowing would not help them change matters. Perhaps she had smiled, but if so, she crushed it as someone spoke.

“You’d grimace too, Ramesa, if you were being strapped every morning before breakfast,” Norine said, much too loudly and plainly meaning for Alviarin to hear. Ramesa, a tall slender woman with silver bells sewn down the sleeves of her white-embroidered dress, looked startled at being addressed, and likely she was. Norine had few friends, perhaps none. She went on, cutting her eyes toward Alviarin to see whether she had noticed. “It is irrational to call a penance private and pretend nothing is happening when the Amyrlin Seat has imposed it. But then, her rationality has always been overrated, in my opinion.”

Fortunately, Alviarin had only a short way further to reach her rooms. Carefully she closed the outer door and latched the latch. Not that anyone would disturb her, but she had not survived by taking chances except where she had to. The lamps were lit, and a small fire burned on the white marble hearth against the cool of an early spring evening. At least the servants still performed their duties. But even the servants knew.

Silent tears of humiliation began to stream down her cheeks. She wanted to kill Silviana, yet that would only mean a new Mistress of Novices laying the strap across her every morning until Elaida relented. Except that Elaida would never relent. Killing her would be more to the point, yet such killings had to be carefully rationed. Too many unexpected deaths would cause questions, perhaps dangerous questions.

Still, she had done what she could against Elaida. Katerine’s news of this battle was spreading through the Black Ajah, and beyond it already. She had overheard sisters who were not Black talking of Dumai’s Wells in detail, and if the details had grown in the telling, so much the better. Soon, the news from the Black Tower would have diffused through the White Tower, too, likely expanding in the same way. A pity that neither would be sufficient to see Elaida disgraced and deposed, with those cursed rebels practically on the bridges, yet Dumai’s Wells and the disaster in Andor hanging over her head would keep her from undoing what Alviarin had done. Break the White Tower from within, she had been ordered. Plant discord and chaos in every corner of the Tower. Part of her had felt pain at that command, a part of her still did, yet her greater loyalty was to the Great Lord. Elaida herself had made the first break in the Tower, but she had shattered half of it beyond mending.

Abruptly she realized that she was touching her forehead again and snatched her hand down. There was no mark there, nothing to feel or see. Every time she glanced into a mirror, she checked in spite of herself. And yet, sometimes she thought people were

looking at her forehead, seeing something that escaped her own eyes. That was impossible, irrational, yet the thought crept in no matter how often she chased it away. Dashing tears from her face with the hand holding the message from the tapestry, she pulled the other two she had retrieved out of her belt pouch and went to the writing table, standing against the wall.

It was a plain table, and unadorned like all of her furnishings, some of which she suspected might be of indifferent workmanship. A trivial matter; so long as furniture did what it was supposed to do, nothing more mattered. Dropping the three messages on the table beside a small, beaten copper bowl, she produced a key from her pouch, unlocked a brass-banded chest sitting on the floor beside the table, and sorted through the small leatherbound books inside until she found the three she needed, each protected so that the ink on the pages would vanish if any hand but hers touched them. There were far too many ciphers in use for her to keep them in memory. Losing these books would be a painful trial, replacing them arduous, hence the stout chest and the lock. A very good lock. Good locks were not trivialities.

Quickly she stripped off the thin strips of paper wrapping the message recovered from behind the tapestry, held them to a lamp flame and dropped them into the bowl to burn. They were only directions as to where the message was to be left, one meant for each woman in the chain, the extra strips merely a way of disguising how many links the message had to go through to reach its recipient. Too many precautions were an impossibility. Even the sisters of her own heart believed her no more than they. Only three on the Supreme Council knew who she was, and she would have avoided that had it been possible. There could never be too many precautions, especially now.

The message, once she worked it out, bending to write on another sheet, was much as she had expected since the previous night when Talene failed to appear. The woman had left the Green quarters early yesterday carrying fat saddlebags and a small chest. Not having a servant carry them; she had performed the task herself. No one seemed to know where she had gone. The question was, had she panicked on receiving her summons to the Supreme Council, or was there something more? Something more, Alviarin decided. Talene had looked to Yukiri and Doesine as though seeking...guidance, perhaps. She was sure she had not imagined it. Could she have? A very small seed of hope. There must be something more. She needed a threat to the Black, or the Great Lord would withdraw his protection.

Angrily, she pulled her hand away from her forehead.

She never considered using the small ter'angreal she had hidden away to call Mesaana. For one thing, one very important thing, the woman surely intended to kill her, very likely despite the Great Lord's protection. On the instant, if that protection were lost. She had seen Mesaana's face, knew of her humiliation. No woman would let that pass, especially not one of the Chosen. Every night she dreamed of killing Mesaana, often daydreamed of how to manage it successfully, yet that must wait on finding her without the woman knowing herself found. In the meanwhile, she needed more proof. It was

possible that neither Mesaana nor Shaidar Haran would see Talene as verification of anything. Sisters had panicked and run in the past, if rarely, and assuming Mesaana and the Great Lord were ignorant of that would be dangerous.

In turn she touched the ciphered message and the clear copy to the lamp flame and held each by a corner until they had burned nearly to her fingers before dropping them atop the ashes in the bowl. With a smooth black stone that she kept as a paperweight, she crushed the ashes and stirred them about. She doubted that anyone could reconstitute words from ash, but even so....

Still standing, she deciphered the other two messages and learned that Yukiri and Doesine both slept in rooms warded against intrusion. That was unsurprising—hardly a sister in the Tower slept without warding these days—but it meant kidnapping either would be difficult. That was always easiest when carried out in the depths of the night by sisters of the woman's own Ajah. It might yet turn out those glances were happenstance, or imagination. She needed to consider the possibility.

With a sigh, she gathered more of the small books from the chest and gently eased herself onto the goose-down cushion on the chair at the writing table. Not gently enough to stop a wince as her weight settled, though. She barely stifled a whimper. At first, she had thought the humiliation of Silviana's strap far worse than the pain, but the pain no longer really faded. Her bottom was a mass of bruises. And tomorrow, the Mistress of Novices would add to them. And the day after that, and the day after.... A bleak vision of endless days howling under Silviana's strap, of fighting to meet the eyes of sisters who knew all about the visits to Silviana's study.

Trying to chase those thoughts away, she dipped a good steel-nibbed pen and began to write out ciphered orders on thin sheets of paper. Talene must be found and brought back, of course. For punishment and execution, if she had simply panicked, and if she had not, if she had somehow found a way to betray her oaths.... Alviarin clung to that hope while she commanded a close watch put on Yukiri and Doesine. A way had to be found to take them. And if they were caught up in chance and imagination, something could still be manufactured from whatever they said. She would guide the flows in the circle. Something could be made.

She wrote furiously, unaware that her free hand had risen to her forehead, searching for the mark.

Afternoon sunlight slanted through the tall trees on the ridge above the vast Shaido encampment, dappling the air, and songbirds trilled on the branches overhead. Redbirds and bluejays flashed by, slashes of color, and Galina smiled. Heavy rain had fallen in the morning, and the air still held a touch of coolness beneath sparse, slowly drifting white clouds. Likely her gray mare, with its arched neck and lively step, had been the property of a noblewoman, or at the least a wealthy merchant. No one else but a sister could have

afforded such a fine animal. She enjoyed these rides on the horse she had named Swift, because one day it would carry her swiftly to freedom; just as she enjoyed this time alone to dwell on what she would do once she had her freedom. She had plans for repaying those who had failed her, beginning with Elaida. Thinking about those plans, about their eventual fruition, was most enjoyable.

At least, she enjoyed her rides so long as she managed to forget that the privilege was as much a mark of how thoroughly Therava owned her as were the thick white silk robe she wore and her firedrop-studded belt and collar. Her smile faded into a grimace. Adornments for a pet that was allowed to amuse itself when not required to amuse its owner. And she could not remove those jeweled markers, even out here. Someone might see. She rode here to get away from the Aiel, yet they could be encountered in the forest, too. Therava might learn of it. Difficult as it was to admit to herself, she feared the hawk-eyed Wise One to her bones. Therava filled her dreams, and they were never pleasant. Often she woke sweat-soaked and weeping. Waking from those nightmares was always a relief, whether or not she managed to get any sleep for the rest of the night.

There was never any order against escape on these rides, an order she would have had to obey, and that lack produced its own bitterness. Therava knew she would return, no matter how she was mistreated, in the hope that some day the Wise One might remove that cursed oath of obedience. She would be able to channel again, when and as she wished. Sevanna sometimes made her channel to perform menial tasks, or just to demonstrate that she could command it, but that occurred so seldom that she hungered for even that chance to embrace saidar. Therava refused to let her so much as touch the Power unless she begged and groveled, but then refused her permission to channel a thread. And she had groveled, abased herself completely, just to be granted that scrap. She realized that she was grinding her teeth, and forced herself to stop.

Perhaps the Oath Rod in the Tower could lift that oath from her as well as the nearly identical rod in Therava's possession, yet she could not be sure. The two were not identical. It was only a difference in marking, yet what if that indicated that an oath sworn on one was particular to that rod? She dared not leave without Therava's rod. The Wise One often left it lying in the open in her tent, but you will never pick that up, she had said.

Oh, Galina could touch that wrist-thick white rod, stroke its smooth surface, yet however hard she strained, she could not make her hand close on it. Not unless someone handed it to her. At least, she hoped that would not count as picking the thing up. It had to be so. Just the thought that it might not be filled her with bleakness. The yearning in her eyes when she gazed at the rod brought Therava's rare smiles.

Does my little Lina want to be free of her oath? she would say mockingly. Then Lina must be a very good pet, because the only way I will consider freeing you is for you to convince me that you will remain my pet even then.

A lifetime of being Therava's plaything and the target for her temper? A surrogate to be beaten whenever Therava raged against Sevanna? Bleakness was not strong enough to describe her feelings on that. Horror was more like it. She feared she might go mad if that happened. And equally, she feared there might be no escape into madness.

Mood thoroughly soured, she shaded her eyes to check the height of the sun. Therava had merely said that she would like her back before dark, and a good two hours of daylight remained, but she sighed with regret and immediately turned Swift downslope through the trees toward the camp. The Wise One enjoyed finding ways to enforce obedience without direct commands. A thousand ways to make her crawl. For safety, the woman's slightest suggestion must be taken as a command. Being a few minutes late brought punishments that made Galina cringe at the memories. Cringe and heel the mare to a faster pace through the trees. Therava accepted no excuses.

Abruptly an Aielman stepped out in front of her from behind a thick tree, a very tall man in cadin'sor with his spears thrust through the harness that held his bowcase on his back and his veil hanging on his chest. Without speaking, he seized her bridle.

For an instant, she gaped at him, then drew herself up indignantly. "Fool!" she snapped. "You must know me by now. Release my horse, or Sevanna and Therava will take turns removing your skin!"

These Aiel usually showed little on their faces, yet she thought his green eyes widened slightly. And then she screamed as he seized the front of her robe in a huge fist and jerked her from the saddle.

"Be silent, gai'shain," he said, but as though he cared nothing for whether she obeyed.

At one time she would have had to, but once they realized that she obeyed any order from anyone, there had been too many who enjoyed sending her on foolish errands that kept her occupied when Therava or Sevanna wanted her. Now, she need obey only certain Wise Ones and Sevanna, so she kicked and flailed and screamed in desperate hope of attracting someone who knew she belonged to Therava. If only she were allowed to carry a knife. Even that would have been a help. How could this man not recognize her, or at least know what her jeweled belt and collar meant? The encampment was immense, as filled with people as many large cities, yet it seemed that everyone could point out Therava's pet wetlander. The woman would have this fellow skinned, and Galina meant to enjoy every minute of watching.

All too quickly it became apparent that a knife would have been no use at all. Despite her struggles, the brute handled her easily, pulling her cowl down over her head, blinding her, then stuffing as much of it as he could into her mouth before binding it there. Then he flipped her face down and bound her wrists and ankles tightly. As easily as if she had been a child! She still thrashed, but it was wasted effort.

“He wanted some gai’shain that aren’t Aiel, Gaul, but a gai’shain in silk and jewels, and out riding?” a man said, and Therava stiffened. That was no Aielman. Those were the accents of Murandy! “Sure and that’s none of your ways, is it?”

“Shaido.” The word was spat out like a curse.

“Well, we still need to find a few more if he’s to learn anything useful. Maybe more than a few. There are tens of thousands of folks in white down there, and she could be anywhere among them.”

“I think maybe this one can tell Perrin Aybara what he needs to know, Fager Neald.”

If she had stiffened before, now she froze. Ice seemed to form in her stomach, and in her heart. Perrin Aybara had sent these men? If he attacked the Shaido trying to rescue his wife, he would be killed, destroying her leverage with Faile. The woman would not care what was revealed, with her man dead, and the others had no secrets they feared having known. In horror, Galina saw her hopes of obtaining the rod melting away. She had to stop him. But how?

“And why would be you thinking that, Gaul?”

“She is Aes Sedai. And a friend of Sevanna, it seems.”

“Is she, now?” the Murandian said in a thoughtful tone. “Is she that?”

Strangely, neither man sounded the least uneasy over laying hands on an Aes Sedai. And the Aielman apparently had done so fully aware of what she was. Even if he was a renegade Shaido, he had to be ignorant of the fact that she could not channel without permission. Only Sevanna and a handful of the Wise Ones knew that. This was all growing more confusing by the moment.

Suddenly she was lifted into the air and laid on her belly. Across her own saddle, she realized, and the next moment she was bouncing on the hard leather, one of the men using a hand to keep her from falling as the mare began to trot.

“Let us go to where you can make us one of your holes, Fager Neald.”

“Just the other side of the slope, Gaul. Why, I’ve been here so often, I can make a gateway nearly anywhere at all. Do you Aiel run everywhere?”

A gateway? What was the man blathering about? Dismissing his nonsense, she considered her options, and found none good. Bound like a lamb for market, gagged so she would not be heard ten paces away if she shrieked her lungs out, her chances of escape were nonexistent unless some of the Shaido sentries intercepted her captors. But did she want them to? Unless she reached Aybara, she had no way to stop him from ruining everything. On the other hand, how many days off did his camp lie? He could not

be very near, or the Shaido would have found him by now. She knew scouts had been making sweeps as far as ten miles from the camp. However many days were required to reach him, it would take as many to return. Not merely minutes late, but days late.

Therava would not kill her for it. Just make her wish she were dead. She could explain. A tale of being captured by brigands. No, just a pair; it was hard enough to believe two men had gotten this near the encampment, much less a band of brigands. Unable to channel, she had needed time to escape. She could make the tale convincing. It might persuade Therava. If she said.... It was useless. The first time Therava had punished her for being late, it had been because her cinch broke and she had had to walk back leading her horse. The woman had not accepted that excuse, and she would not accept being kidnapped, either. Galina wanted to weep. In fact, she realized that she was weeping, hopeless tears she was helpless to stop.

The horse halted, and before she could think, she convulsed wildly, trying to fling herself off the saddle, screaming as loudly as her gag permitted. They had to be trying to avoid sentries. Surely Therava would understand if the sentries returned with her and her captors, even if she was late. Surely she could find a way to handle Faile even with her husband dead.

A hard hand smacked her rudely. "Be silent," the Aielman said, and they began to trot again.

Her tears began again, too, and the silk cowl covering her face grew damp. Therava was going to make her howl. But even while she wept, she began to work on what she would say to Aybara. At least she could salvage her chances of obtaining the rod. Therava was going to.... No. No! She needed to concentrate on what she could do. Images of the cruel-eyed Wise One holding a switch or a strap or binding cords reared in her mind, but every time she forced them down while she went over every question Aybara might ask and what answers she would give him. On what she would say to make him leave his wife's safety in her hands.

In none of her calculations had she expected to be lifted down and stood upright no more than an hour after being captured.

"Unsaddle her horse, Noren, and picket it with the others," the Murandian said.

"Right away, Master Neald," came a reply. In a Cairhienin accent.

The bonds around her ankles fell away, a knife blade slid between her wrists, severing those cords, and then whatever held her gag in place was untied. She spat out silk sodden with her own saliva and jerked the cowl back.

A short man in a dark coat was leading Swift away through a straggle of large, patched brown tents and small, crude huts that seemed made from tree branches, including pine boughs with brown needles. How long for pine to turn brown? Days, surely, perhaps

weeks. The sixty or seventy men tending cookfires or sitting on wooden stools looked like farmers in their rough coats, but some were sharpening swords, and spears and halberds and other polearms stood stacked in a dozen places. Through the gaps between the tents and huts, she could see more men moving about to either side, a number of them in helmets and breastplates, mounted and carrying long, streamered lances. Soldiers, riding out on patrol. How many more lay beyond her sight? No matter. What was in front of her eyes was impossible! The Shaido had sentries further from their camp than this. She was certain they did!

“If the face wasn’t enough,” Neald murmured, “that cool, calculating study would convince me. Like she’s examining worms under a rock she’s turned over.” A weedy fellow in a black coat, he knuckled his waxed mustaches in an amused way, careful not to spoil the points. He wore a sword, but he certainly had no look of soldier or armsman about him. “Well, come along then, Aes Sedai,” he said, clasping her upper arm. “Lord Perrin will be wanting to ask you some questions.” She jerked free, and he calmly took a firmer grip. “None of that, now.”

The huge Aielman, Gaul, took her other arm, and she could go with them or be dragged. She walked with her head high, pretending they were merely an escort, but anyone who saw how they held her arms would know differently. Staring straight ahead, she was still aware of armed farmboys—most were young—staring at her. Not gaping in astonishment, just watching, considering. How could they be so high-handed with an Aes Sedai? Some of the Wise Ones who were unaware of the oath holding her had begun expressing doubt that she was Aes Sedai because she obeyed so readily and truckled so for Therava, but these two knew what she was. And did not care. She suspected those farmers knew, too, and yet none displayed any surprise at how she was being treated. It made the back of her neck prickle.

As they approached a large red-and-white striped tent with the doorflaps tied back, she overheard voices from inside.

“...said he was ready to come right now,” a man was saying.

“I can’t afford to feed one more mouth when I don’t know for how long,” another man replied. “Blood and ashes! How long does it take to arrange a meeting with these people?”

Gaul had to duck into the tent, but Galina strode in as though entering her own rooms in the Tower. A prisoner she might be, yet she was Aes Sedai, and that simple fact was a powerful tool. And weapon. Who was he trying to arrange a meeting with? Not Sevanna, surely. Let it be anyone but Sevanna.

In stark contrast to the ramshackle camp outside, there was a good flowered carpet for a floor here, and two silk hangings embroidered with flowers and birds in a Cairhienin fashion hung from the roof poles. She focused on a tall, broad-shouldered man in his shirtsleeves with his back to her, leaning on his fists against a slender-legged table that

was decorated with lines of gilding and covered with maps and sheets of paper. She had only glimpsed Aybara at a distance in Cairhien, yet she was sure this was the farmboy from Rand al'Thor's home village in spite of the silk shirt and well-polished boots. Even the turndowns were polished. If nothing else, everyone in the tent seemed to be looking to him.

As she walked into the tent, a tall woman in high-necked green silk with small touches of lace at her throat and wrists, black hair falling in waves to her shoulders, laid a hand on Aybara's arm in a familiar manner. Galina recognized her. "She seems cautious, Perrin," Berelain said.

"Wary of a trap, in my estimation, Lord Perrin," put in a graying, hard-bitten man in an ornate breastplate worn over a scarlet coat. A Ghealdanin, Galina thought. At least he and Berelain explained the presence of soldiers, if not how they could be where they could not possibly be.

Galina was very glad she had not encountered the woman in Cairhien. That would have made matters now more than merely awkward. She wished her hands were free to wipe the residue of tears from her face, but the two men held onto her arms firmly. There was nothing to be done about it. She was Aes Sedai. That was all that mattered. That was all she would allow to matter. She opened her mouth to take command of the situation....

Aybara suddenly looked over his shoulder at her, as though he had sensed her presence in some way, and his golden eyes froze her tongue. She had dismissed tales that the man had a wolf's eyes, but he did. A wolf's hard eyes in a stone-hard face. He made the Ghealdanin look almost soft. A sad face behind that close-cropped beard, as well. Over his wife, no doubt. She could make use of that.

"An Aes Sedai wearing gai'shain white," he said flatly, turning to face her. He was a large man, if not nearly so large as the Aielman, and he loomed just by standing there, those golden eyes taking in everything. "And a prisoner, it seems. She didn't want to come?"

"She thrashed like a trout on the riverbank while Gaul was tying her up, my Lord," Neald replied. "Myself, I had nothing to do but stand and watch."

A strange thing to say, and in such a significant tone. What could he have...? Abruptly she became aware of another man in a black coat, a stocky, weathered fellow with a silver pin in the shape of a sword fastened to his high collar. And she remembered where she had last seen men in black coats. Leaping out of holes in the air just before everything turned to utter disaster at Dumai's Wells. Neald and his holes, his gateways. These men could channel.

It took everything she could summon not to try jerking free of the Murandian's clasp, not to edge away. Just being this close to him made her stomach writhe. Being touched by him.... She wanted to whimper, and that surprised her. Surely she was tougher than that!

She concentrated on maintaining an appearance of calm while trying to work moisture back into her suddenly dry mouth.

“She claims friendship with Sevanna,” Gaul added.

“A friend of Sevanna,” Aybara said, frowning. “But wearing a gai’shain robe. A silk robe, and jewels, but still.... You didn’t want to come, but you didn’t channel to try stopping Gaul and Neald from bringing you. And you’re terrified.” He shook his head. How did he know she was afraid? “I’m surprised to see an Aes Sedai with the Shaido after Dumai’s Wells. Or don’t you know about that? Let her go, let her go. I doubt she’ll take off running since she let you bring her this far.”

“Dumai’s Wells does not matter,” she said coldly as the men’s hands fell away. The pair remained on either side of her like guards, though, and she was proud of the steadiness of her voice. A man who could channel. Two of them, and she was alone. Alone, and unable to channel a thread. She stood straight, head erect. She was Aes Sedai, and they must see her every inch an Aes Sedai. How could he know she was afraid? Not a shred of fear tinged her words. Her face might as well been carved of stone for all she let show. “The White Tower has purposes none but Aes Sedai can know or understand. I am about White Tower business, and you are interfering. An unwise choice for any man.” The Ghealdanin nodded ruefully, as though he had learned that lesson personally; Aybara merely looked at her, expressionless.

“Hearing your name was the only reason I didn’t do something drastic to these two,” she continued. If the Murandian or the Aielmen brought up how long that had taken, she was ready to claim that she had been stunned at first, but they held silent, and she spoke quickly and forcefully. “Your wife Faile is under my protection, as well as Queen Alliandre, and when my business with Sevanna is done, I will take them to safety with me and help them reach wherever they wish to go. In the meanwhile, however, your presence here endangers my business, White Tower business, which I cannot allow. It also endangers you, and your wife, and Alliandre. There are tens of thousands of Aiel in that camp. Many tens of thousands. If they descend on you, and their scouts will find you soon if they haven’t already, they will wipe all of you from the face of the earth. They may harm your wife and Alliandre for it, as well. I may not be able to stop Sevanna. She is a harsh woman, and many of her Wise Ones can channel, nearly four hundred of them, all willing to use the Power to do violence, while I am one Aes Sedai, and constrained by my Oaths. If you wish to protect your wife and the Queen, turn away from their camp and ride as hard as you can. They may not attack you if you are obviously retreating. That is the only hope you or your wife have.” There. If only a few of the seeds she had planted took root, they should be enough to turn him back.

“If Alliandre is in danger, Lord Perrin,” the Ghealdanin began, but Aybara stopped him with a raised hand. That was all it took. The soldier’s jaw tightened till she thought she might hear it creak, yet he remained silent.

“You’ve seen Faile?” the young man said, excitement touching his voice. “She’s well? She hasn’t been harmed?” The fool seemed not to have a word she said beyond mention of his wife.

“Well, and under my protection, Lord Perrin.” If this jumped-up country boy wanted to call himself a lord, she would tolerate it for the moment. “She and Alliandre, both.” The soldier glowered at Aybara, but he did not take the opportunity to speak. “You must listen to me. The Shaido will kill you—”

“Come here and look at this,” Aybara broke in, turning to the table and drawing a large page toward him.

“You must forgive his lack of manners, Aes Sedai,” Berelain murmured, handing her a worked silver cup of dark wine. “He is under considerable strain, as you might understand in the circumstances. I haven’t introduced myself. I am Berelain, the First of Mayene.”

“I know. You may call me Alyse.”

The other woman smiled as though she knew that was a false name, yet accepting it. The First of Mayene was far from unsophisticated. A pity she had to deal with the boy instead; sophisticated people who thought they could dance with Aes Sedai were easily led. Country folk could prove stubborn out of ignorance. But the fellow should know something of Aes Sedai by now. Perhaps ignoring him would give him reason to think on who and what she was.

The wine tasted like flowers on her tongue. “This is very good,” she said with genuine gratitude. She had not tasted decent wine for weeks. Therava would not permit her a pleasure the Wise One denied herself. If the woman learned that she had found several barrels in Malden, she would not even have mediocre wine. And surely would be beaten as well.

“There are other sisters in the camp, Alyse Sedai. Masuri Sokawa and Seonid Traighan, and my own advisor, Annoura Larisen. Would you like to speak to them after you finish with Perrin?”

With feigned casualness, Galina drew up her cowl till her face was shadowed and took another swallow of wine for time to think. Annoura’s presence was understandable, given Berelain’s, but what were the other two doing there? They had been among those who fled the Tower after Suan was deposed and Elaida raised. True, none of them would know of her involvement in kidnapping the al’Thor boy for Elaida, but still....

“I think not,” she murmured. “Their business is theirs, and mine is mine.” She would have given a great deal to know their business, but not at the cost of being recognized. Any friend of the Dragon Reborn might have...notions...about a Red. “Help me convince Aybara, Berelain. Your Winged Guards are no match for what the Shaido will

send against them. Whatever Ghealdanin you have with you won't make a difference. An army will make no difference. The Shaido are too many, and they have hundreds of Wise Ones ready to use the One Power as a weapon. I have seen them do it. You may die, too, and even if you are captured, I can't promise I can make Sevanna release you when I leave."

Berelain laughed as though thousands of Shaido and hundreds of Wise Ones who could channel were of no account. "Oh, have no fear they will find us. Their camp lies a good three-day ride from here, perhaps four. The terrain turns rough not far from where we are."

Three days, perhaps four. Galina shivered. She should have put it together before this. Three or four days of ground covered in less than an hour. Through a hole in the air created with the male half of the Power. She had been near enough for saidin to touch her. She kept her voice steady, though. "Even so, you must help me convince him not to attack. It would be disastrous, for him, for his wife, for everyone involved. Beyond that, what I am doing is important to the Tower. You have always been a strong supporter of the Tower." Flattery, for the ruler of a single city and a few hides of land, but flattery oiled the insignificant as well as it did the mighty.

"Perrin is stubborn, Alyse Sedai. I doubt you'll change his mind. That isn't easy to do once he has it set." For some reason, the young woman smiled a smile mysterious enough to credit a sister.

"Berelain, could you have your talk later?" Aybara said impatiently, and it was not a suggestion. He tapped the sheet of paper with a thick finger. "Alyse, would you look at this?" That was not a suggestion, either. Who did the man think he was, ordering an Aes Sedai?

Still, moving to the table took her a little way from Neald. It brought her nearer the other one, who was studying her intently, but he was on the other side of the table. A feeble barrier, yet she could ignore him by looking at the sheet of paper under Aybara's finger. Keeping her eyebrows from rising was difficult. The town of Malden was outlined there, complete with the aqueduct that brought water from a lake five miles away, and also a rough outline of the Shaido camp surrounding the city. The real surprise was that markings seemed to indicate the arrival of septs since the Shaido reached Malden, and the number of those meant his men had been observing the camp for some time. Another map, roughly sketched, seemed to show the city itself in some detail.

"I see you have learned how large their camp is," she said. "You must know rescuing her is hopeless. Even if you have a hundred of those men," speaking of them was not easy, and she could not entirely keep the contempt from her voice, "it isn't enough. Those Wise Ones will fight back. Hundreds of them. It would be a slaughter, thousands dead, your wife perhaps among them. I have told you, she and Alliandre are under my protection. When my business is finished, I will take them to safety. You have heard me say it, so by the Three Oaths you know it is true. Don't make the mistake of thinking that

your connection to Rand al'Thor will protect you if you interfere in what the White Tower is doing. Yes, I know who you are. Did you think your wife wouldn't tell me? She trusts me, and if you want to keep her safe, you must trust me, too."

The idiot looked at her as though her words had flown over his head without touching his ears. Those eyes were truly unsettling. "Where does she sleep? Her, and everyone else who was captured with her. Show me."

"I cannot," she replied levelly. "Gai'shain seldom sleep in the same place two nights running." With that lie vanished the last chance that she could leave Faile and the others alive. Oh, she had never intended to increase the risk of her own escape by aiding them, but that could always have been explained later by some change in circumstances. She could not hazard the possibility that they might actually escape one day and uncover her direct lie, however.

"I will get her free," he growled, almost too softly for her to hear. "Whatever it takes."

Her thoughts raced. There seemed no way to divert him from it, but perhaps she could delay him. She had to do at least that. "Will you at least hold off your attack? I may be able to conclude my affairs in a few more days, perhaps a week." A deadline should sharpen Faile's efforts. Before, it would have been dangerous; a threat not carried out lost all force, and the chance had been too great that the woman might be unable to get the rod in time. Now, the chance became necessary. "If I can do that, and bring your wife and others out, there will be no reason for you to die needlessly. One week."

Frustration painting his face, Aybara thumped his fist on the table hard enough to make it bounce. "You can have a few days," he growled, "maybe even a week or more, if—" He bit off whatever he had been about to say. Those strange eyes centered on her face. "But I can't promise how many days," he went on. "If I had my druthers, I'd be attacking now. I won't leave Faile a prisoner a day longer than I have to while I wait on Aes Sedai schemes for the Shaido to bear fruit. You say she's under your protection, but how great a protection can you really give, wearing that robe? There are signs of drunkenness in the camp. Even some of their sentries drink. Are the Wise Ones given to it as well?"

The sudden shift nearly made her blink. "The Wise Ones drink only water, so you needn't think you can find them all in a stupor," she told him dryly. And quite truthfully. It always amused her when the truth served her purposes. Not that the Wise Ones' example was bearing much fruit. Drunkenness was rife among the Shaido. Every raid brought back all the wine that could be found. Dozens and dozens of small stills produced vile brews from grains, and every time the Wise Ones destroyed a still, two sprang up in its place. Letting him know that would only encourage him, though. "As for the others, I have been with armies before this and seen more drinking than I have among the Shaido. If a hundred are drunk among tens of thousands, what gain is there for you? Really, it will be better if you promise me a week. Two would be better still."

His eyes flashed to the map, and his right hand made a fist again, but there was no anger in his voice. "Do the Shaido go inside the town walls very often?"

She set the winecup down on the table and drew herself up. Meeting that yellow-eyed gaze required effort, yet she managed without a falter. "I think it's past time you showed proper respect. I am an Aes Sedai, not a servant."

"Do the Shaido go inside the town walls very often?" he repeated in exactly the same even tone. She wanted to grind her teeth.

"No," she snapped. "They've looted everything worth stealing and some things that aren't." She regretted the words as soon as they left her tongue. They had seemed safe, until she remembered men who could leap through holes in the air. "That isn't to say they never enter. Most days, a few go in. There might be twenty or thirty at any time, more on occasion, in groups of two or three." Did he have the wit to see what that would mean? Best to make sure he saw. "You could not secure them all. Inevitably, some will escape to warn the camp."

Aybara only nodded. "When you see Faile, tell her that on the day she sees fog on the ridges and hears wolves howl by daylight, she and the others must go to Lady Cairen's fortress at the north end of the city and hide there. Tell her I love her. Tell her I'm coming for her." Wolves? Was the man demented? How could he ensure that wolves would...? Suddenly, with those wolf's eyes on her, she was not sure she wanted to know.

"I will tell her," she lied. Perhaps he only meant to use the men in black coats to grab his wife? But why wait at all, in that case? Those yellow eyes hid secrets she wished she knew. Who was he trying to meet? Clearly not Sevanna. She would have thanked the Light for that if she had not abandoned that foolishness long since. Who was ready to come to him right away? One man had been mentioned, but that might mean a king with an army. Or al'Thor himself? Him, she prayed never to see again.

Her promise seemed to release something in the young man. He exhaled slowly, and a tension she had not noticed left his face. "The trouble with a blacksmith's puzzle," he said softly, tapping the outline of Malden, "is always getting the key piece into place. Well, that's done. Or soon will be."

"Will you stay for supper?" Berelain asked. "The hour is near."

The light was dimming in the open doorway. A lean serving woman in dark wool, her white hair in a bun on the back of her head, entered and began lighting the lamps.

"Will you promise me at least a week?" Galina demanded, but Aybara shook his head. "In that case, every hour is important." She had never intended staying a moment longer than necessary, but she had to force her next words out. "Will you have one of your...men...take me back to as near the camp as possible?"

“Do it, Neald,” Aybara commanded. “And at least try to be polite.” He said that!

She drew a deep breath and pushed her cowl back. “I want you to hit me, here.” She touched her cheek. “Hard enough to bruise.”

Finally she had said something that got through to the man. Those yellow eyes widened, and he tucked his thumbs behind his belt as though securing his hands. “I will not,” he said, sounding as though she were insane.

The Ghealdanin’s mouth hung open, and the serving woman was staring at her, the burning taper in her hand hanging dangerously near her skirts.

“I require it,” Galina said firmly. She would need every scrap of verisimilitude she could find with Therava. “Do it!”

“I don’t believe he will,” Berelain said, gliding forward with her skirts gathered. “He has very country ways. If you will permit me?”

Galina nodded impatiently. There was nothing for it, though the woman likely would not leave a very convincing.... Her vision went dark, and when she could see again, she was swaying slightly. She could taste blood. Her hand went to her cheek, and she winced.

“Too hard?” Berelain inquired anxiously.

“No,” Galina mumbled, fighting to keep her face smooth. Had she been able to channel, she would have torn the woman’s head off! Of course, if she could have channeled, none of this would be necessary. “Now, the other cheek. And have someone fetch my horse.”

She rode into the forest with the Murandian, to a place where several of the huge trees lay toppled and oddly slashed, sure it would be difficult for her to use his hole in the air, but when the man produced a vertical silver-blue slash that widened into a view of steeply climbing land, she did not think of tainted saidin at all as she heeled Swift through the opening. Never a thought except of Therava.

She almost howled when she realized she was on the opposite side of the ridge from the encampment. Frantically she raced the sinking sun. And lost.

She had been right, unfortunately. Therava did not accept excuses. She was particularly upset over the bruises. She herself never marred Galina’s face. What followed easily equaled her nightmares. And it lasted much longer. At times, when she was screaming her loudest, she almost forgot her desperate need to get the rod. But she clung to that. Obtain the rod, kill Faile and her friends, and she would be free.

Egwene regained awareness slowly, and muzzy as she was, barely had the presence of mind to keep her eyes closed. Pretending still to be unconscious was all too easy. Her head lay slumped on a woman's shoulder, and she could not have lifted it had she tried. An Aes Sedai's shoulder; she could sense the woman's ability. Her brain felt stuffed with wool, her thoughts were slow and veering, her limbs all but numb. Her wool riding dress and cloak were dry, she realized, despite the soaking she had received in the river. Well, that was easily managed with the Power. Small chance they had channeled the water from her garments for her comfort, though. She was seated, wedged in between two sisters, one of whom wore a flowery perfume, each using a hand to keep her more or less upright. They were in a coach by the way they all swayed and the clatter of a trotting team's horseshoes on paving stones. Carefully, she opened her eyes to narrow slits.

The coach's side curtains were tied back, though the stink of rotting garbage made her think it would have been better to pull them shut. Garbage, rotting! How could Tar Valon have come to that? Such neglect of the city was reason enough by itself for Elaida to be removed. The windows let in enough moonlight for her to dimly make out three Aes Sedai seated facing her, in the rear of the coach. Even had she not known they could channel, their fringed shawls would have made it certain. In Tar Valon, wearing a shawl with fringe could result in unpleasantness for a woman who was not Aes Sedai. Oddly, the sister on the left appeared to be huddling against the side of the coach, away from the other two, and if they were not exactly huddling, at least they were sitting very close together, as though avoiding contact with the third Aes Sedai. Very odd.

Abruptly it came to her that she was not shielded. Muddled she might be, but that made no sense at all. They could feel her strength, as she could theirs, and while none was weak, she thought she could overcome all five if she were quick enough. The True Source was a vast sun just beyond the edge of sight, calling to her. The first question was, did she dare try yet? In the state her head was, thought wading through knee-deep mud, whether she could actually embrace saidar was uncertain, and succeed or fail, they would know once she tried. Best to try recovering a little beforehand. The second question was, how long did she dare wait? They would not let her go unshielded forever. Experimentally, she tried wiggling her toes inside her stout leather shoes, and was delighted when they moved obediently. Life seemed to be returning slowly to her arms and legs. She thought she might be able to raise her head now, if unsteadily. Whatever they had given her was wearing off. How long?

Events were taken out of her hands by the dark-haired sister sitting in the middle of the rear seat, who leaned forward and slapped her so hard that she toppled onto the lap of the woman she had been leaning against. Her hand went to her stinging cheek on its own volition. So much for pretending unconsciousness.

"There was no need for that, Katherine," a raspy voice said above her as its owner lifted her upright again. She could hold her head up, just, it turned out. Katherine. That would be Katherine Alruddin, a Red. It seemed important to identify her captors for some reason, though she knew nothing of Katherine beyond her name and Ajah. The sister she had

fallen onto was yellow-haired, but her moon-shadowed face belonged to a stranger. “I think you gave her too much of the forkroot,” the woman went on.

A chill flashed through her. So that was what she had been fed! She racked her brain for everything Nynaeve had told her about that vile tea, but her thoughts were still slow. Better, though, it seemed. She was sure Nynaeve had said the effects took some time to go away completely.

“I gave her the exact dose, Felaana,” the sister who had slapped her replied dryly, “and as you can see, it is leaving her precisely as it should. I want her able to walk by the time we reach the Tower. I certainly don’t intend to help carry her again,” she finished with a glare for the sister seated to Egwene’s left, who shook her head, beaded braids clicking faintly. That was Pritalle Nerbaijan, a Yellow who had done her best to avoid teaching novices or Accepted and made little secret of her dislike for the task when forced to it.

“To have my Harril carry her, it would have been improper, yes?” she said coldly. In fact, icily. “Myself, I will be glad if she can walk, but if not, so be it. In any case, I look forward to handing her over to others. If you do not want to carry her again, Katerine, I do not want to stand guard over her half the night in the cells.” Katerine gave a dismissive toss of her head.

The cells. Of course; she was bound for one of those small, dark rooms on the first level of the Tower’s basement. Elaida would charge her with falsely claiming to be the Amyrlin Seat. The penalty for that was death. Strangely, that brought no fear. Perhaps it was the herb working on her. Would Romanda or Lelaine give way, agreeing to raise Amyrlin after she was dead? Or would they continue to struggle with one another until the entire rebellion faltered and failed, and the sisters straggled back to Elaida? A sad thought, that. Bone-deep sad. But if she could feel sorrow, the forkroot was not quenching her emotions, so why was she not afraid? She thumbed her Great Serpent ring. At least, she tried to, and discovered it gone. Anger flared, white-hot. They might kill her, but they would not deny she was Aes Sedai.

“Who betrayed me?” she asked, pleased that her tone was even and cool. “It can’t hurt to tell me, since I’m your prisoner.” The sisters stared at her as though surprised she had a voice.

Katerine leaned forward casually, raising her hand. The Red’s eyes tightened when pale-haired Felaana lunged to catch the slap before it could land on Egwene.

“She will no doubt be executed,” the raspy-voiced woman said firmly, “but she is an initiate of the Tower, and none of us has the right to beat her.”

“Take your hand off me, Brown,” Katerine snarled, and shockingly, the light of saidar enveloped her.

In an instant the glow surrounded every woman in the coach except Egwene. They eyed one another like strange cats on the brink of hissing, on the brink of lashing out with claws. No, not everyone; Katerine and the taller sister seated against her flank never glanced at one another. But they had glares aplenty for the rest. What under the Light was going on? The mutual hostility was so thick in the air, she could have sliced it like bread.

After a moment, Felaana released Katerine's wrist and leaned back, yet no one released the Source. Egwene suddenly suspected that no one was willing to be the first. Their faces were all serene in the pale moonlight, but the Brown's hands were knotted in her shawl, and the sister leaning away from Katerine was smoothing her skirts repeatedly.

"About time for this, I think," Katerine said, weaving a shield. "We wouldn't want you to try anything...futile." Her smile was vicious. Egwene merely sighed as the weave settled on her; she doubted she could have embraced saidar yet in any case, and against five already full of the Power, success would have lasted moments at most. Her mild reaction appeared to disappoint the Red. "This may be your last night in the world," she went on. "It wouldn't surprise me in the slightest if Elaida had you stilled and beheaded tomorrow."

"Or even tonight," her lanky companion added, nodding. "I think Elaida may be that eager to see the end of you." Unlike Katerine, she was merely stating a fact, but she was surely another Red. And watching the other sisters, as though she suspected one of them might try something. This was very strange!

Egwene held on to her composure, denying them the response they wanted. The response Katerine wanted, at least. She was determined to maintain her dignity right to the headsman's block. Whether or not she had managed to do well as Amyrlin, she would die in a manner fitting for the Amyrlin Seat.

The woman huddling away from the two Reds spoke, and her voice, full of Arafel, allowed Egwene to put a name to the hard, narrow face, dimly seen by moonlight. Berisha Terakuni, a Gray with a reputation for the strictest, and often harshest, interpretation of the law. Always to the letter, of course, but never with any sense of mercy. "Not tonight or tomorrow, Barasine, not unless Elaida is willing to summon the Sitters in the middle of the night, and they're willing to answer. This requires a High Court, no thing of minutes or even hours, and the Hall seems less eager to please Elaida than she might wish, small wonder. The girl will be tried, but the Hall will sit in the matter when they choose, I think."

"The Hall will come when Elaida calls or she'll hand them all penances that will make them wish they had," Katerine sneered. "The way Jala and Merym galloped off when we saw who we'd caught, she knows by now, and I'll wager that for this one, Elaida will drag Sitters from their beds with her own hands if she must." Her voice grew smug, and cutting at the same time. "Perhaps she will name you to the Chair of Pardon. Would you enjoy that?"

Berisha drew herself up indignantly, shifting her shawl on her arms. In some instances, the Chair of Pardon faced the same penalty as the one she defended. Perhaps this charge required it; despite Siuan's best efforts to complete her education, Egwene did not know.

"What I want to hear," the Gray said after a moment, ostentatiously ignoring the women on the seat with her, "is what did you do to the harbor chain? How can it be undone?"

"It can't be undone," Egwene replied. "You must know that it's cuendillar, now. Even the Power won't break it, only strengthen it. I suppose you could sell it if you tear down enough of the harbor wall to remove it. If anyone can afford a piece of cuendillar that big. Or would want such a thing."

This time, no one tried to stop Katerine from slapping her, and very hard, too. "Hold your tongue!" the Red snapped.

That seemed good advice unless she wanted to be slapped silly. She could taste blood in her mouth already. So Egwene held her tongue, and silence descended on the rolling coach, the others all glowing with saidar and watching each other suspiciously. It was incredible! Why had Elaida ever chosen women who clearly detested one another for tonight's task? As a demonstration of her power, just because she could? No matter. If Elaida allowed her to live through the night, at least she could let Siuan know what had happened to her—and likely to Leane, as well. She could let Siuan know they had been betrayed. And pray that Siuan could track down the betrayer. Pray that the rebellion would not collapse. She offered a small prayer for that on the spot. It was much more important than the other.

By the time the coachman reined in the team, she had recovered enough to follow Katerine and Pritalle from the coach unaided, though her head still felt a trifle thick. She could stand, but she doubted she had the strength to run far, not that trying would achieve anything beyond being halted after a few steps. So she stood calmly beside the dark-lacquered coach and waited as patiently as the four-horse team in their harness. After all, she was harnessed, too, in a manner of speaking. The White Tower loomed over them, a thick pale shaft rearing into the night. Few of its windows were alight, but some of those were near the very top, perhaps in the rooms Elaida occupied. It was very strange. She was a prisoner and unlikely to live much longer, yet she felt she had come home. The Tower seemed to renew her vigor.

Two Tower-liveried backriders, the Flame of Tar Valon on their chests, had dismounted from the rear of the coach to unfold the steps, and they stood offering a white-gloved hand to each woman who dismounted, but only Berisha availed herself, and only because it let her reach the paving stones quickly while eyeing the other sisters, Egwene suspected. Barasine gave the fellows such looks that one gulped audibly and the other's face grew pale. Felaana, busy trying to watch the others, merely waved the men away irritably. All five still held saidar, even here.

They were at the main rear entrance, stone-railed marble stairs descending from the second level beneath four massive bronze lanterns that cast a wide pool of flickering light, and to her surprise, a single novice stood alone at the foot of the stairs, clutching her white cloak against a slight chill in the air. She had more than half-expected Elaida to meet them in person, to gloat over her capture with a retinue of sycophants. That the novice was Nicola Treehill was a second surprise. The last place she would have thought to find the runaway was inside the White Tower itself.

By the way Nicola's eyes widened when Egwene emerged from the coach, the novice was more startled than herself, but she dropped a neat if hasty curtsy to the sisters. "The Amyrlin says she...she is to be handed over to the Mistress of Novices, Katerine Sedai. She says that Silviana Sedai has her instructions."

"So, it seems you'll be birched tonight, at least," Katerine murmured with a smile. Egwene wondered whether the woman hated her personally, or for what she represented, or simply hated everyone. Birched. She had never seen it done, but she had heard a description. It sounded extremely painful. She met Katerine's gaze levelly, and after a moment the smile faded. The woman looked about to strike her again. The Aiel had a way of dealing with pain. They embraced it, gave themselves over to it without fighting or even trying to hold back screams. Perhaps that would help. The Wise Ones said that way the pain could be cast off without keeping its hold on you.

"If Elaida means to drag this out unnecessarily, I'll have no more part in it tonight," Felaana announced, frowning at everyone in sight including Nicola. "If the girl is to be stilled and executed, that should be sufficient." Gathering her skirts, the yellow-haired sister darted past Nicola up the stairs. Actually running! The glow of saidar still surrounded her as she vanished inside.

"I agree," Pritalle said coolly. "Harril, I think I'll walk with you while you stable Bloodlance." A dark, stocky man, who had come out of the darkness leading a tall bay, bowed to her. Stone-faced, he wore a Warder's chameleon cloak that made most of him seem not to be there when he stood still and rippled with colors when he moved. Silently he followed Pritalle off into the night, but watching over his shoulder, guarding Pritalle's back. The light remained around her, too. There was something here that Egwene was missing.

Suddenly, Nicola spread her skirts in another curtsy, deeper this time, and words burst out of her in a rush. "I'm sorry I ran away, Mother. I thought they'd let me go faster here. Areina and I thought—"

"Don't call her that!" Katerine barked, and a switch of Air caught the novice across the bottom hard enough to make her squeal and jump. "If you're attending the Amyrlin Seat tonight, child, get back to her and tell her I said her orders will be carried out. Now, run!"

With one last, frantic glance at Egwene, Nicola gathered her cloak and her skirts and went scrambling up the stairs so fast that twice she stumbled and nearly fell. Poor Nicola.

Her hopes had surely been disappointed, and if the Tower discovered her age.... She must have lied about that to betaken in; lying was one of her several bad habits. Egwene dismissed the girl from her mind. Nicola was no longer her concern.

“There was no need to frighten the child out of her wits,” Berisha said, surprisingly. “Novices need to be guided, not bludgeoned.” A far cry from her views on the law.

Katerine and Barasine rounded on the Gray together, staring at her intently. Only two cats, now, but rather than another cat, they saw a mouse.

“Do you mean to come with us to Silviana alone?” Katerine asked with a decidedly unpleasant smile twisting her lips.

“Aren’t you afraid, Gray?” Barasine said, a touch of mockery in her voice. For some reason, she swung one arm a little so the long fringe of her shawl swayed. “Just the one of you, and two of us?”

The two backriders stood like statues, like men who desired heartily to be anywhere else and hoped to remain unnoticed if sufficiently still.

Berisha was no taller than Egwene, but she drew herself up and clutched her shawl around her “Threats are specifically prohibited by Tower—”

“Did Barasine threaten you?” Katerine cut in softly. Softly, yet with sharp steel wrapped in it. “She just asked whether you are afraid. Should you be?”

Berisha licked her lips uneasily. Her face was bloodless, and her eyes grew wider and wider, as though she saw things she had no wish to see. “I...I think I will take a walk in the grounds,” she said at last, in a strangled voice, and sidled away without ever taking her eyes from the two Reds. Katerine gave a small, satisfied laugh.

This was absolute madness! Even sisters who hated one another to the toenails did not behave in this fashion. No woman who gave in to fear as easily as Berisha had could ever have become Aes Sedai in the first place. Something was wrong in the Tower. Very wrong.

“Bring her,” Katerine said, starting up the stairs.

At last releasing saidar, Barasine gripped Egwene’s arm tightly and followed. There was no choice save to gather her divided skirts and go along without a struggle. Yet her spirits were oddly buoyant.

Entering the Tower truly did feel like returning home. The white walls with their friezes and tapestries, the brightly colored floor tiles, seemed as familiar as her mother’s kitchen. More so, in a way; it had been far longer since she saw her mother’s kitchen than these hallways. She took in the strength of home with every breath. But there was strangeness,

too. The stand-lamps were all alight, and the hour could not be all that late, yet she saw no one. There were always a few sisters gliding along the corridors, even in the dead of night. She remembered that vividly, catching sight of some sister while running on an errand in the small hours and despairing that she would ever be so graceful, so queenly. Aes Sedai kept their own hours, and some Browns hardly liked being awake during daylight at all. Night held fewer distractions from their studies, fewer interruptions to their reading. But there was no one. Neither Katerine nor Barasine made any comment as they walked along hallways lifeless except for the three of them. Apparently this silent emptiness was a matter of course, now.

As they reached pale stone stairs set in an alcove, another sister finally appeared, climbing from below. A plump woman in a red-slashed riding dress, with a mouth that looked ready to smile, she wore her shawl, edged with long red silk fringe, draped along her arms. Katerine and the others might well have worn theirs to mark them out clearly at the docks—no one in Tar Valon would bother a woman wearing a fringed shawl, and most kept clear, if they could, particularly men—but why here?

The newcomer's thick black eyebrows raised over bright blue eyes at the sight of Egwene, and she planted her fists on ample hips, letting her shawl slide to her elbows. Egwene did not think she had ever seen the woman before, but apparently, the reverse was not true. "Why, that's the al'Vere girl. They sent her to Southharbor? Elaida will give you a pretty for this night's work; yes, she will. But look at her. Look at how she stands so. You'd think the pair of you were an honor guard for escort. I'd have thought she'd be weeping and wailing for mercy."

"I believe the herb is still dulling her senses," Katerine muttered with a sidelong scowl for Egwene. "She doesn't seem to realize her situation." Barasine, still holding Egwene's arm, gave her a vigorous shake, but after a small stagger she managed to catch her balance and kept her face smooth, ignoring the taller woman's glares.

"In shock," the plump Red said, nodding. She did not sound exactly sympathetic, but after Katerine, she was near enough. "I've seen that before."

"How did matters go at Northharbor, Melare?" Barasine asked.

"Not so well as with you, it seems. With everyone else squealing to themselves like shoats caught under a fence over there being two of us, I was afraid we'd scare off who we were trying to catch. It's a good thing there were two of us who would talk to one another. As it was, all we caught was a wilder, and not before she turned half the harbor chain to cuendillar. We ended up near killing the coach-horses by galloping back like, well, like we'd caught your prize. Zanica insisted. Even put her Warder up in place of the coachman."

"A wilder," Katerine said contemptuously.

“Only half?” Relief stood out clearly in Barasine’s voice. “Then Northharbor isn’t blocked.”

Melare’s eyebrows climbed again as the implications sank in. “We’ll see how clear it is in the morning,” she said slowly, “when they let down the half that’s still iron. The rest of it stands out stiff like, well, like a bar of cuendillar. Myself, I doubt any but smaller vessels will be able to cross.” She shook her head with a puzzled expression. “There was something strange, though. More than strange. We couldn’t find the wilder, at first. We couldn’t feel her channeling. There was no glow around her, and we couldn’t see her weaves. The chain just started turning white. If Arebis’s Warder hadn’t spotted the boat, she might have finished and gotten away.”

“Clever Leane,” Egwene murmured. For an instant, she squeezed her eyes shut. Leane had prepared everything in advance, before coming in sight of the harbor, all inverted and her ability masked. If she herself had been as clever, she likely would have escaped cleanly. But then, hindsight always saw furthest.

“That’s the name she gave,” Melare said, frowning. The woman’s eyebrows, like dark caterpillars, were very expressive. “Leane Sharif. Of the Green Ajah. Two very stupid lies. Desala is striping her from top to bottom down there, but she won’t budge. I had to come up for a breath. I never liked flogging, even for one like that. Do you know this trick of hers, child? How to hide your weaves?”

Oh, Light! They thought Leane was a wilder pretending to be Aes Sedai. “She’s telling the truth. Stilling cost her the ageless look and made her appear younger. She was Healed by Nynaeve al’Meara, and since she was no longer of the Blue, she chose a new Ajah. Ask her questions only Leane Sharif could know the answers—” Speech ended for her as a ball of Air filled her mouth, forcing her jaws wide till they creaked.

“We don’t have to listen to this nonsense,” Katherine growled.

Melare stared into Egwene’s eyes, though. “It sounds senseless, to be sure,” she said after a moment, “but I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to ask a few questions besides, ‘What is your name?’ At worse, it’ll cut the tedium of the woman’s answers. Shall we take her down to the cells, Katherine? I don’t dare leave Desala alone with the other one for long. She despises wilders, and she purely hates women who claim to be Aes Sedai.”

“She’s not going to the cells, yet,” Katherine replied. “Elaida wants her taken to Silviana.”

“Well, as long as I learn that trick from this child or the other one.” Hitching her shawl up onto her shoulders, Melare took a deep breath and headed back down the stairs, a woman with labor ahead of her she was not looking forward to. She gave Egwene hope for Leane, though. Leane was “the other one,” now, no longer “the wilder.”

Katherine set off down the corridor walking quickly, and in silence, but Barasine pushed Egwene ahead of her after the other Red, muttering half under her breath about how

ridiculous it was to think that a sister could learn anything from a wilder, or from a jumped-up Accepted who told outlandish lies. Maintaining some shreds of dignity was difficult, to say the least, while being shoved down a hallway by a long-legged woman with your mouth gaping open as wide as it would go and drool leaking down your chin, but she managed as best she could. In truth, she hardly thought about it. Melare had given her too much to think on. Melare added to the sisters in the coach. It could hardly mean what it seemed to, but if it did....

Soon the blue-and-white floor tiles became red-and-green, and they approached an unmarked wooden door between two tapestries of flowered trees and stout-beaked birds so colorful they seemed unlikely to be real. Unmarked, but bright with polish and known to every initiate of the Tower. Katerine rapped on the door with what might almost have been a display of diffidence, and when a strong voice inside called, "Come," she drew a deep breath before pushing the door open. Did she have bad memories of entering here as novice or Accepted, or was it the woman who awaited them who made her hesitant?

The study of the Mistress of Novices was exactly as Egwene recalled, a small, dark-paneled room with plain, sturdy furnishings. A narrow table by the doorway was lightly carved in a peculiar pattern, and bits of gilt clung to the carved frame of the mirror on one wall, but nothing else was decorated in any way. The stand-lamps and the pair of lamps on the writing table were unadorned brass, though of six different patterns. The woman who held the office usually changed when a new Amyrlin was raised, yet Egwene was ready to wager that a woman who had come to this room as a novice two hundred years ago would recognize nearly every stick and perhaps everything.

The current Mistress of Novices—in the Tower, at least—was on her feet when they entered, a stocky woman nearly as tall as Barasine, with a dark bun on the back of her head and a square, determined chin. There was an air of brooking no nonsense about Silviana Brehon. She was a Red, and her charcoal-colored skirts had discreet red slashes, but her shawl lay draped across the back of the chair behind the writing table. Her large eyes were unsettling, however. They seemed to take in everything about Egwene in a glance, as though the woman not only knew every thought in her head, but also what she would think tomorrow.

"Leave her with me and wait outside," Silviana said in a low, firm voice.

"Leave her?" Katerine said incredulously.

"Which words did you not understand, Katerine? Need I repeat myself?"

Apparently she did not. Katerine flushed, but she said no more. The glow of saidar surrounded Silviana, and she took over the shield smoothly, without giving any opening when Egwene might have embraced the Power herself. She was certain that she could, now. Except that Silviana was far from weak; there was no hope she could break the woman's shield. The gag of Air disappeared at the same time, and she contented herself with digging a handkerchief from her belt pouch and calmly wiping her chin. The pouch

had been searched—she always kept the handkerchief on top, not beneath everything else—but learning whether anything besides her ring had been taken would have to wait. There had not been anything of much use to a prisoner in any case. A comb, a packet of needles, some small scissors, odds and ends. The Amyrlin's stole. What sort of dignity she could maintain while being birched was beyond her, but that was the future; this was now.

Silviana studied her, arms folded beneath her breasts, until the door closed behind the other two Reds. "You aren't hysterical, at least," she said then. "That makes matters easier, but why aren't you hysterical?"

"Would it do any good?" Egwene replied, returning the handkerchief to her pouch. "I can't see how."

Silviana strode to the writing table and stood reading from a sheet of paper there, occasionally glancing up. Her expression was a perfect mask of Aes Sedai serenity, unreadable. Egwene waited patiently, hands folded at her waist. Even upside down she could recognize Elaida's distinctive hand on that page, if not read what it said. The woman need not think she would grow nervous at waiting. Patience was one of the few weapons left to her, at present.

"It seems the Amyrlin has been mulling over what to do about you for some time," Silviana said finally. If she had expected Egwene to begin shifting her feet or wringing her hands, she gave no sign of disappointment. "She has a very complete plan ready. She doesn't want the Tower to lose you. Nor do I. Elaida has decided that you have been used as a dupe by others and should not be held accountable. So you will not be charged with claiming to be Amyrlin. She has stricken your name from the roll of the Accepted and entered it in the novice book again. I agree with that decision, frankly, though it's never been done before. Whatever your ability with the Power, you missed almost everything else you should have learned as a novice. You needn't fear that you'll have to take the test again, though. I wouldn't force anyone to go through that twice."

"I am Aes Sedai by virtue of having been raised to the Amyrlin Seat," Egwene replied calmly. There was no incongruity in fighting for a title when claiming it might still lead to her death. Acquiescence would be as sharp a blow to the rebellion as her execution. Maybe sharper. A novice again? That was laughable! "I can cite the relevant passages in the law, if you wish."

Silviana arched an eyebrow and sat down to open a large leather bound book. The punishments book. Dipping her pen in the simple glass ink jar, she made a notation. "You've just earned your first visit to me. I'll give you the night to think about it rather than putting you over my knee now. Let's hope contemplation increases the salubrious effect."

"Do you think you can make me deny who I am with a spanking?" Egwene was hard put to keep incredulity from her voice. She was not sure she succeeded.

“There are spankings and spankings,” the other woman replied. Wiping the nib clean on a scrap, she replaced the pen in its glass holder and considered Egwene. “You’re accustomed to Sheriam Bayanar as Mistress of Novices.” Silviana shook her head disparagingly. “I’ve browsed her punishments book. She let the girls get away with too much, and was far too lenient with her favorites. As a result, she was forced to deal out correction much more often that she should have had to. I record a third of the punishments in a month that Sheriam did, because I make sure that everyone I punish leaves here wishing above all things never to be sent to me again.”

“Whatever you do, you’ll never make me deny who I am,” Egwene said firmly. “How can you possibly think you can make this work? Am I to be escorted to classes, shielded all the while?”

Silviana leaned back against her shawl, resting her hands on the edge of the table. “You mean to resist as long as you can, do you?”

“I will do what I must.”

“And I will do what I must. During the day, you will not be shielded at all. But every hour you will be given a mild tincture of forkroot.” Silviana’s mouth twisted on the word. She picked up the sheet that contained Elaida’s notes as if to read, then let it drop back onto the tabletop, rubbing her fingertips as though something noxious clung to them. “I cannot like the stuff. It seems aimed directly at Aes Sedai. Someone who cannot channel can drink five times the amount that makes a sister pass out and barely grow dizzy from it. A disgusting brew. Yet useful, it seems. Perhaps it can be used on those Asha’man. The tincture won’t make you dizzy, but you won’t be able to channel enough to cause any problems. Only trickles. Refuse to drink, and it will be poured down your throat anyway. You’ll be closely watched as well, so you don’t try to slip away afoot. At night, you will be shielded, since giving you enough forkroot to make you sleep through the night would leave you doubled up with stomach cramps the next day.

“You are a novice, Egwene, and you will be a novice. Many sisters still consider you a runaway, no matter what orders Siuan Sanche gave, and others doubtless will think Elaida wrong not to have you beheaded. They’ll watch for every infraction, every fault. You may sneer at a spanking now, before you’ve received it, but when you’re being sent to me for five, six, seven every day? We’ll see how long it takes you to change your mind.”

Egwene surprised herself by giving a small laugh, and Silviana’s eyebrows shot up. Her hand twitched as though to reach for her pen.

“Did I say something funny, child?”

“Not at all,” Egwene replied truthfully. It had occurred to her that she could deal with the pain by embracing it in the Aiel manner. She hoped it worked, but there went all hope for

dignity. While she was being punished, at least. For the rest, she could only do what she could.

Silviana glanced at her pen, but finally stood without touching it. "Then I am done with you. For tonight. I will see you before breakfast, however. Come with me."

She started for the door, confident that Egwene would follow, and Egwene did. Attacking the other woman physically would achieve no more than another entry in the book. Forkroot. Well, she would find a way around that somehow. If not.... She refused to think about that.

Katerine and Barasine were startled to say the least at hearing Elaida's plans for Egwene, and not best pleased to learn that they would be watching her and shielding her while she slept, although Silviana told them she would arrange for other sisters to come after an hour or two.

"Why both of us?" Katerine wanted to know, which earned her a wry glance from Barasine. If only one were sent, it surely would not be Katerine, who stood higher.

"Firstly, because I said so." Silviana waited until the other two Reds nodded in acceptance. They did so with obvious reluctance, but not enough to make her wait long. She had not put on her shawl to come into the hallway, and in some odd fashion, she seemed the one out of place. "And secondly, because this child is tricky, I think. I want her watched carefully awake or asleep. Which of you has her ring?"

After a moment, Barasine produced the circle of gold from her belt pouch, muttering, "I only thought to keep it as a memento. Of the rebels being brought to heel. They're finished, now, for sure." A memento? It was stealing was what it was!

Egwene reached for the ring, but Silviana's hand got there first, and it was into her pouch that the ring went. "I'll keep this until you have the right to wear it again, child. Now take her to the novice quarters and settle her in. A room should have been prepared by now."

Katerine resumed the shield, and Barasine reached for Egwene's arm again, but Egwene stretched out a hand toward Silviana. "Wait. There's something I must tell you." She had agonized over this. It would be all too easy to reveal far more than she wanted. But she had to do it. "I have the Talent of Dreaming. I've learned to tell the true dreams, and to interpret some of them. I dreamt of a glass lamp that burned with a white flame. Two ravens flew out of mist, struck the lamp, and flew on. The lamp wobbled, flinging off droplets of flaming oil. Some of those burned up in midair, other landed scattered about, and the lamp still wobbled on the edge of falling. It means the Seanchan will attack the White Tower and do great harm."

Barasine sniffed. Katerine gave a derisive snort.

“A Dreamer,” Silviana said flatly. “Is there anyone who can back up your claim? And if there is, how can be sure your dream means the Seanchan? Ravens would indicate the Shadow, to me.”

“I’m a Dreamer, and when a Dreamer knows, she knows. Not the Shadow. The Seanchan. As for who knows what I can do....” Egwene shrugged. “The only one you can reach is Leane Sharif, who’s being held in the cells below.” She saw no way to bring the Wise Ones into this, not without revealing entirely too much.

“That woman is a wilder, not B,” Katerine began angrily, but her mouth snapped shut when Silviana raised a peremptory hand.

The Mistress of Novices studied Egwene carefully, her face still an unreadable mask of calmness. “You truly believe you are what you say,” she said finally. “I do hope your Dreaming won’t cause as many problems as young Nicola’s Foretelling. If you truly can Dream. Well, I will pass along your warning. I can’t see how the Seanchan could strike at us here in Tar Valon, but watchfulness never hurts. And I’ll question this woman being held below. Carefully. And if she fails to back up your tale, then your visit to me in the morning will be even more memorable for you.” She waved her hand at Katerine. “Take her away before she hands me another nugget and keeps me from getting any sleep at all tonight.”

This time, Katerine muttered as much as Barasine. But they both waited until they were beyond earshot of Silviana. That woman was going to be a formidable opponent. Egwene hoped embracing pain worked as well as the Wise Ones claimed. Otherwise.... Otherwise did not bear thinking about.

A lean, gray-haired serving woman gave them directions to the room she had just finished making up, on the third gallery of the novice quarters, and hurried on after brief curtsies to the two Reds. She never so much as glanced at Egwene. What was another novice to her? It tightened Egwene’s jaw. She was going to have to make people not see her as just another novice.

“Look at her face,” Barasine said. “I think it’s finally settling in on her.”

“I am who I am,” Egwene replied calmly. Barasine pushed her toward the stairs that rose through the hollow column of railed galleries, lit by the fat, waning moon. A breeze sighed through, the only sound. It all seemed so peaceful. There was no light showing around any door. The novices would be asleep by now, except for those who had late chores or tasks. It was peaceful for them. Not for Egwene, though.

The tiny, windowless room might almost have been the one she had occupied when she first came to the Tower, with its narrow bed built against the wall and a small fire burning on the little brick hearth. The lamp on the small table was lit, but it lighted little more than the tabletop, and the oil must have gone bad, because it gave off a faint, unpleasant stink. A washstand completed the furnishings, except for a three-legged stool, onto which

Katerine promptly lowered herself, adjusting her skirts as though on a throne. Realizing there was nowhere for her to sit, Barasine crossed her arms beneath her breasts and frowned at Egwene.

The room was quite crowded with three women in it, but Egwene pretended the other two did not exist as she readied herself for bed, hanging her cloak and belt and dress on three of the pegs set along one rough-plastered white wall. She did not ask for help with her buttons. By the time she laid her neatly rolled stockings atop her shoes, Barasine had settled herself cross-legged on the floor and was immersed in a small, leatherbound book that she must have carried in her belt pouch. Katerine kept her eyes on Egwene as though she expected her to make a break for the door.

Crawling beneath the light woolen blanket in her shift, Egwene settled her head on the small pillow—not a goose-down pillow, that was for sure!—and went through the exercises, relaxing her body one part at a time, that would put her to sleep. She had done that so often that it seemed no sooner had she begun, than she was asleep...

...and floating, formless, in a darkness that lay between the waking world and Tel'aran'rhiod, the narrow gap between dream and reality, a vast void filled with a myriad of twinkling specks of light that were all the dreams of all the sleepers in the world. They floated around her, in this place with no up or down, as far as the eye could see, flickering out as a dream ended, springing alight as one began. She could recognize some at sight, put a name to the dreamer, but she did not see the one she sought.

It was to Siuan she needed to speak, Siuan who likely knew by now that disaster had struck, who might be unable to sleep until exhaustion took her under. She settled herself to wait. There was no sense of time here; she would not grow bored with waiting. But she had to work out what to say. So much had changed since she wakened. She had learned so much. Then, she had been sure she would die soon, sure the sisters inside the Tower were a solid army behind Elaida. Now.... Elaida thought her safely imprisoned. No matter this talk of making her a novice again; even if Elaida really believed it, Egwene al'Vere did not. She did not consider herself a prisoner, either. She was carrying the battle into the heart of the Tower itself. If she had had lips there, she would have smiled.

The hardcover edition of *Knife of Dreams* will be coming in October 2005 from Tor Books.