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[Version 2.0]

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Ravens

This is a new prologue written for the Wheel of Time series. It was first published in "From the Two Rivers," a new paperback published in late 2001 that is actually just the first half of "The Eye of The World."

This far below Emond's Field, halfway to the Waterwood, trees lined the banks of the Winespring Water. Mostly willows, their leafy branches made a shady canopy over the water near the bank. Summer was not far off, and the sun was climbing toward midday, yet here in the shadows a soft breeze made Egwene's sweat feel cool on her skin. Tying the skirts of her brown wool dress up above her knees, she waded a little way into the river to fill her wooden bucket. The boys just waded in, not caring whether their snug breeches got wet. Some of the girls and boys filling buckets laughed and used their wooden dippers to fling water at one another, but Egwene settled for enjoying the stir of the current on her bare legs, and her toes wriggling on the sandy bottom as she climbed back out. She was not here to play. At nine, she was carrying water for the first time, but she was

going to be the best water-carrier ever.

Pausing on the bank, she set down her bucket to unfasten her skirts and let them fall to her ankles. And to retie the dark green kerchief that gathered her hair at the nape of her neck. She wished she could cut it at her shoulders, or even shorter, like the boys. She would not need to have long hair for years yet, after all. Why did you have to keep doing something just because it had always been done that way? But she knew her mother, and she knew her hair was going to stay long.

Close to a hundred paces further down the river, men stood knee-deep in the water, washing the black-faced sheep that would later be sheared. They took great care getting the bleating animals into the river and back out safely. The Winespring Water did not flow as swiftly here as it did in Emond's Field, yet it was not slow. A sheep that got swept away might drown before it could struggle ashore.

A large raven flew across the river to perch high in the branches of a whitewood near where the men were washing sheep. Almost immediately a redcrest began diving at the raven, a flash of scarlet that chattered noisily.

The redcrest must have a nest nearby. Instead of taking flight and maybe attacking the smaller bird, though, the raven just shuffled sideways on the limb to where a few smaller branches sheltered it a little. It peered down toward the working men.

Ravens sometimes bothered the sheep, but ignoring the redcrest's attempts to frighten it away was more than unusual. More than that, she had the strange feeling that the black bird was watching the men, not the sheep. Which was silly, except She had heard people say that ravens and crows were the Dark One's eyes. That thought made goosebumps break out all down

her arms and even on her back. It was a silly idea. What would the Dark One want to see in the Two Rivers? Nothing ever happened in the Two Rivers.

"What are you up to, Egwene?" Kenley Ahan demanded, stopping beside her. "You can't play with the children today." Two years older than she, he carried himself very straight, stretching to seem taller than he was. This was his last year carrying water at the shearing, and he behaved as if that cloaked him with some sort of authority.

She gave him a level look, but it did not work as well as she hoped.

His square face twisted up in a frown. "If you're turning sick, go see the Wisdom. If not . . . well . . . get on about your work." With a quick nod, as if he, had solved a problem, he hurried off making a great show of holding his bucket with one hand, well away from his side. He won't keep that up long once he's out of my sight, she thought sourly. She was going to have to work on that look. She had seen it work for older girls.

The dipper's handle slid on the rim of her bucket as she picked it up with both hands. It was heavy, and she was not big for her age, but she followed Kenley as quickly as she could. Not because of anything he had said, certainly. She did have work to do, and she was going to be the best water-carrier ever. Her face set with determination. The mulch of last year's leaves rustled under her feet as she walked through the river's shadowy fringe of trees, out into the sunlight. The heat was not too bad, but a few small white clouds high in the sky seemed to emphasize the brightness of the morning.

Widow Aynal's Meadow - it had been called that as long as anyone could remember, though no one knew which Aynal

widow it had been named after - the tree-ringed meadow stood empty most of the year, but now people and sheep crowded the whole long length of it, a good many more sheep than people. Large stones stuck out of the ground here and there, a few almost as tall as a man, but they did not interfere with the activity in the meadow.

Farmers came from all around Emond's Field for this, and village folk came out to help relatives. Everyone in the village had kith or kin of some sort on the farms. Shearing would be going on all across the Two Rivers, down at Deven Ride and up to Watch Hill. Not at Taren Ferry, of course. Many of the women wore shawls draped loosely over their arms and flowers in their hair, for the formality and so did some of the older girls, though their hair was not in the long braid the women had. A few even wore dresses with embroidery around the neck, as if this really were a feastday. In contrast, most of the men and boys went coatless, and some even had their shirts unlaced.

Egwene did not understand why they were allowed to do that. The women's work was no cooler than the men's.

Big, wooden-railed pens at the far end of the meadow held sheep already sheared, and others held those waiting to be washed, all watched by boys of twelve and up. The sheepdogs sprawled around the pens were no good for this work. Groups of those older boys were using wooden staffs to herd sheep to the river for washing, then to keep them from lying down and getting dirty again until they were dry for the men at this end of the meadow who were doing the shearing. Once the sheep were shorn, the boys herded them back to the pens while men carried the fleece to the slatted tables where women sorted the wool and folded it for baling. They kept a tally, and had to be careful that no one's wool was mixed with anyone else's. Along the trees to Egwene's left, other women were beginning to set out food for

the midday meal on long trestle tables. If she was good enough at carrying water, maybe they would let her help with the food or the wool next year, instead of two years later. If she did the best job ever, no one would ever be able to call her a baby again.

She began making her way through the crowd, sometimes carrying the bucket in both hands, sometimes shifting it from one to the other, pausing whenever someone motioned for a dipper of water. Soon she began to perspire again, sweating dark patches on her woolen dress. Maybe the boys with their shirts unlaced were not just being foolish. She ignored the younger children, running around rolling hoops and tossing balls and playing keepaway.

There were only five times each year when so many gathered: at Bel Tine, which was past; at shearing; when the merchants came to buy the wool, still a month or more off, when the merchants came for the cured tabac, after Sunday; and at Foolday, in the fall. There were other feastdays, of course, but none where everyone got together.

Her eyes kept moving, searching the crowd. Among all these people, it would be all too easy to walk up on one of her four sisters. She always avoided them as much as possible. Berowyn, the eldest, was worst. She had been widowed by the breakbone fever last fall and moved back home in the spring. It was hard not to feel for Berowyn, but she fussed so, wanting to dress Egwene and brush her hair. Sometimes she wept and told Egwene how lucky, she felt that the fever had not taken her baby sister, too. Feeling for Berowyn would have been easier if Egwene could stop thinking that sometimes Berowyn saw her as the infant she had lost along with her husband. Maybe all the time. She was just watching for Berowyn. Or one of the other three. That was all.

Near the sheep-pens, she stopped to wipe the sweat from

her forehead. Her bucket was lighter, now, and no trouble to hold with one hand. She eyed the nearest dog cautiously. Standing in front of one of the pens, it was a large animal with a close, curly gray coat and intelligent eyes that seemed to know she was no danger to the sheep.

Still, it was very big, almost waist-high to a grown man.

Mainly the dogs helped protect the flocks when they were in pasture, guarding against wolves and bears and the big mountain cats. She edged away from the dog. Three boys passed her, herding a few dozen sheep toward the river. All five or six years older than she, the boys barely gave her a glance, their full attention on the animals. The herding was easy enough - she could have done it, she was sure - but they had to make sure none of the sheep had a chance to crop grass. A sheep that ate before being sheared could get the gasping and die. A quick look around told her that none of the other boys in sight was anyone she wanted to speak to. Not that she was looking for a particular boy to speak to, of course. She was just looking. Anyway, her bucket would need refilling soon. It was time to start back toward the Winespring Water.

This time she decided to go by way of the row of trestle tables. The smells were tantalizing, as good as any feastday, everything from roast goose to honeycakes. The spicy aroma of the honeycakes filled her nose more than all the rest. Every woman who cooked would have done her very best for the shearing. As she made her way down the tables, she offered water to the women setting out food, but they just smiled at her and shook their heads. She kept on, though, and not just because of the smells. They had tea water boiling on fires behind the tables, but some of them might want cool water from the river. Well, not so cool, now, but still

Ahead of her Kenley was slouching along beside the tables, no longer trying for every inch of height. If anything, he seemed to be trying for shorter. He still carried his bucket in one hand, but from the way it swung, it must have been empty, so he could not be offering water to anyone. Egwene frowned. Furtive was the only word to describe him. Now, what was he . . . ? Abruptly his hand darted out and snatched a honeycake from the table.

Egwene's mouth fell open indignantly. And he had the nerve to talk to her about children? He was as bad as Ewin Finngar!

Before Kenley could take a second step, Mistress Ayellin descended on him like a stooping falcon, seizing his ear with one hand and the honeycake with the other.

They were her honeycakes. A slim woman with a thick gray braid that hung below her hips, Corin Ayellin baked the best sweets in Emond's Field. Except for mother, Egwene added loyally. But even her mother said Mistress Ayellin was better. With sweets, anyway. Mistress Ayellin handed out crusty cakes and slices of pie with a free hand, so long as it was not near mealtime or your mother had not asked her not to, but she could deal heavily with boys who tried to filch behind her back. Or with anyone else.

Stealing, she called it, and Mistress Ayellin did not abide stealing. She still had Kenley by his ear and was shaking a finger at him, talking in a low voice. Kenley's face was all twisted up as if he was about cry, and he shrank in on himself till he appeared shorter than Egwene. She gave a satisfied nod. She did not think he would try to give orders to anyone any time soon.

She moved further from the tables as she walked on by Mistress Ayellin and Kenley, so no one would suspect her of trying to filch sweets. The thought had never entered her head.

Not really, anyway, not so it counted.

Suddenly she leaned forward, peering between the people moving back and forth in front of her. Yes. That was Perrin Aybara, a stocky boy taller than most his age.

And he was a friend of Rand. She darted through the crowd without noticing whether anyone motioned for water and did not stop until she was only a few paces from Perrin.

He was with his parents, and his mother had the baby, Paetram, on her hip, and little Deselle clinging to her skirt with one hand, though Perrin's little sister was looking around with interest at all the people and even sheep being herded past. Adora, his other sister, stood with her arms folded across her chest and a sullen expression that she was trying to hide from her mother. Adora would not have to carry water until next year, and she probably was anxious to be off playing with her friends. The last person in the little group was Master Luhhan. The tallest man in Emond's Field, with arms like tree trunks and a chest that strained his white shirt, he made Master Aybara look slight instead of just slender. He was talking with Mistress Aybara and Master Aybara both. That puzzled Egwene.

Master Luhhan was the blacksmith in Emond's Field, but neither Master Aybara nor Mistress Aybara would bring the whole family to ask after smithing. He was on the Village Council, too, but the same thing applied. Besides, Mistress Aybara would no sooner open her mouth about Council business than Master Aybara would about Women's Circle business. Egwene might only be nine, but she knew that much. Whatever they were talking about, they were almost done, and that was good. She did not care what they were talking about.

"He's a good lad, Joslyn," Master Luhhan said. "A good lad,

Con. He'll do just fine."

Mistress Aybara smiled fondly. Joslyn Aybara was a pretty woman, and when she smiled, it seemed the sun might bide its head in defeat. Perrin's father laughed softly and ruffled Perrin's curly hair. Perrin blushed very red and said nothing. But then, he was shy, and he seldom said very much.

"Make me fly, Perrin," Deselle said, lifting up her hands to him. "Make me fly."

Perrin barely waited to sketch a polite bow to the grownups before turning to take his sister's hands. They moved a few steps from the others, and then Perrin began to spin around and around, faster and faster, until Deselle's feet left the ground. Round and round he spun her, higher and higher in great swoops, while she laughed and laughed in delight.

After a few minutes, Mistress Aybara said, "That's enough, Perrin. Put her down before she sickens up." But she said it kindly, with a smile.

Once Deselle's feet were back on the ground, she clung to one of Perrin's hands with both hers, staggering a little, and maybe not too far from sickening up. But she kept laughing and demanding he make her fly some more.

Shaking his head, he bent to talk to her. He was always so serious. He did not laugh very often.

Abruptly Egwene realized that someone else was watching Perrin. Cilia Cole, a pink-cheeked girl a couple of years older than she, stood only a few feet away with a silly smile on her face, making calf eyes at him. All he needed to do was turn his head to see her! Egwene grimaced in disgust. She would never be

fool enough to make big eyes at a boy like some kind of woolhead. Anyway, Perrin was not even a whole year older than Cilia. Three or four years older was best. Egwene's sisters might have no time to talk to her, but she listened to other girls old enough to know.

Some said more, but most thought three or four. Perrin glanced toward Egwene and Cilia and went back to talking quietly to Deselle. Egwene shook her head. Maybe Cilia was a ninny, but he ought to at least notice.

Movement in the limbs of a big wateroak beyond Cilia caught her eye, and she gave a start. The raven was up there, and it still seemed to be watching. And there was a raven in that tall pine tree, too, and one in the next, and in that hickory, and Nine or ten ravens that she could see, and they all seemed to be watching. It had to be her imagination. Just her-

"Why were you staring at him?"

Startled, Egwene jumped and spun around so fast that she banged herself on the knee with her bucket. A good thing it was nearly empty, or she could have hurt herself.

She shifted her feet, wishing she could rub her knee.

Adora stood looking up at her with a perplexed expression on her face, but she could not be more puzzled than Egwene.

"What are you talking about, Adora?"

"Perrin, of course. Why were you staring at him? Everybody says you'll marry Rand al'Thor. When you're older, I mean, and have your hair in a braid."

"What do you mean, everybody says?" Egwene said dangerously, but Adora just giggled. It was exasperating. Nothing was working the way it should today.

"Perrin is pretty, of course. At least, I've heard lots of girls say so. And lots of girls look at him, just like you and Cilia."

Egwene blinked and managed to put that last out of her head. She had not been looking at him anything at all the way Cilia had! But, Perrin, pretty? Perrin? She looked over her shoulder to see whether she could find pretty in him.

He was gone! His father was still there, and his mother, with Paetrarn and Deselle, but Perrin was nowhere to be seen. Drat! She had meant to follow him.

"Aren't you lonely without your dolls, Adora?" she said sweetly. "I didn't think you ever left your house without at least two."

Adora's open-mouth stare of outrage was quite satisfying.

"Excuse me," Egwene said, brushing past her. "Some of us are old enough to have work to do." She managed not to limp as she made her way back to the river.

This time she did not pause to look at the men washing sheep, and she very carefully did not look for a raven. She did examine her knee, but it was not even bruised.

Carrying her filled bucket back out to the meadow, she refused to limp. It had just been a little bump.

She kept watching cautiously for her sisters as she carried water, pausing only to let someone take the dipper.

And for Perrin. Mat would be as good as Perrin, but she did not see him, either. Drat Adora! She had no right to say things like that!

Walking in among the tables where women were sorting the wool, Egwene came to a dead stop, staring at her youngest sister.

She froze, hoping Loise would look the other way, just for an instant. That was what she got for trying to watch for Perrin and Mat as well as her sisters. Loise was only fifteen, but she had a sour expression on her face and her hands on her hips as she confronted Dag Coplin. Egwene could never make herself call him Master Coplin except aloud, to be polite; her mother said you had to be polite, even to someone like Dag Coplin.

Dag was a wrinkled old man with gray hair that he did not wash very often. Or maybe not at all. The tag hanging from the table by a string was inked to match the ear-notches on his sheep. "That's good wool you're setting aside," he growled at Loise. "I won't be cheated on my clip, girl. Step aside and I'll show you what goes where my own self."

Loise did not move an inch. "Wool from bellies, hindquarters and tails has to be washed again, Master Coplin." She put just a bit of emphasis on 'Master.' She was feeling snippish. "You know as well as I, if the merchants find twice-washed wool in just one bale, everyone will get less for their clip. Maybe my father can explain it to you better than I can."

Dag drew in his chin and grumbled something under his breath. He knew better than to try this with Egwene's father.

"I'm sure my mother could explain it so you'd understand,"

Loise said relentlessly.

Dag's cheek twitched, and he put on a sickly grin.

Muttering that he trusted Loise to do what was right, he backed away, then hurried off little short of running. He was not foolish enough to bring himself to the attention of the Women's Circle if he could help it. Loise watched him go with a definite look of satisfaction.

Egwene took the opportunity to dart away, breathing a sigh of relief when Loise did not shout after her. Loise might prefer sorting wool to helping with the cooking, but she would much rather be climbing trees or swimming in the Waterwood, even if most girls had abandoned that sort of thing by her age. And she would take her chore out on Egwene, given half a chance. Egwene would have liked to go swimming with her, but Loise plainly considered her company a nuisance, and Egwene was too proud to ask.

She scowled. All of her sisters treated her like a baby.

Even Alene, when Alene noticed her at all. Most of the time, Alene had her nose in a book, reading and re-reading their father's library. He had almost forty books! Egwene's favorite was *The Travels of Jain Farstrider*. She dreamed of seeing all those strange lands he wrote about. But if she was reading a book and Alene wanted it, she always said it was much too 'complex' for Egwene and just took it! Drat all four of them!

She saw some of the water-carriers taking breaks to sit in the shade or trade jokes, but she kept moving, although her arms did ache. Egwene al'Vere was not going to slack off. She kept watching for her sisters, too. And for Perrin.

And Mat. Drat Adora, anyway! Drat all of them!

She did pause when she neared the Wisdom. Doral Barran was the oldest woman in Emond's Field, maybe in the whole Two Rivers, white-haired and frail, but still clear-eyed and not stooped at all. The Wisdom's apprentice, Nynaeve, was on her knees with her back to Egwene, tending Bili Congar, wrapping a bandage around his leg. His breeches had been cut away short. Bili, sitting on a log, was another grownup who Egwene found it hard to show the proper respect. He was always doing silly things and getting himself hurt. He was the same age as Master Luhhan, but he looked at least ten years older, his face hollow-cheeked and his eyes sunken.

"You've played the fool often enough in the past, Bili Congar," Mistress Barran said sternly, "but drinking while handling wool shears is worse than playing the fool."

Oddly, she was not looking down at him, but at Nynaeve.

I only had a little ale, Wisdom," he whined. "Because of the heat. Just a swallow."

The Wisdom sniffed in disbelief, but she continued to watch Nynaeve like a hawk. That was surprising. Mistress Barran often praised Nynaeve publicly for being such a quick learner. She had apprenticed Nynaeve three years earlier, after her then-apprentice died of some sickness even Mistress Barran could not cure. Nynaeve had been a recent orphan, and a lot of people said the Wisdom should have sent her to her relatives in the country after her mother died, and taken on someone years older. Egwene's mother did not say so, but Egwene knew she thought it.

Nynaeve straightened on her knees, done with fastening the

bandage, and gave a satisfied nod. And to Egwene's surprise, Mistress Barran knelt down and undid it again, even lifting the bread-poultice to peer at the gash in Bili's thigh before beginning to wrap the cloth back around his leg. She actually looked . . . disappointed. But why? Nynaeve began fiddling with her braid, tugging at it the way she did when she was nervous, or trying to bring attention to the fact that she was a grown woman, now.

When is she going to outgrow that? Egwene thought. It was nearly a year since the Women's Circle had let Nynaeve braid her hair.

A flutter of motion in the air caught Egwene's eye, and she stared. More ravens dotted the trees around the meadow now. Dozens and dozens of them, and all watching. She knew they were. Not one made a try to steal anything from the tables of food. That was just unnatural.

Come to think of it, the birds were not looking at the trestle tables at all. Or at the tables where women were working with the wool. They were watching the boys herding sheep. And the men shearing sheep and carrying wool. And the boys carrying water, too. Not the girls, or the women, just the men and boys. She would have bet on it, even if her mother did say she should not bet. She opened her mouth to ask the Wisdom what it meant.

"Don't you have work to do, Egwene?" Nynaeve said without turning around.

Egwene jumped in spite of herself. Nynaeve had been doing that ever since last fall, knowing that Egwene was there without looking, and Egwene wished she would stop.

Nynaeve turned her head then, and looked at her over one shoulder. It was a level look, the sort Egwene had been trying on

Kenley. She did not have to hop for Nynaeve the way she would for the Wisdom. Nynaeve was just trying to make up for Mistress Barran doubting her work. Egwene thought about telling her that Mistress Ayellin wanted to talk to her about a pie. Studying Nynaeve's face, she decided that might not be a good notion. Anyway, she had been doing what she had vowed not to, slacking off, standing around watching Nynaeve and the Wisdom.

Making as much of a curtsy as she could while holding her bucket - to the Wisdom, not Nynaeve - she turned away. She was not hopping, and not because Nynaeve looked at her. Certainly not. And not hurrying, either. Just walking - quickly - to get back to her work.

Still, she walked quickly enough that before she realized it, she was back among the tables where the women were working wool. And face to face across one of the tables with her sister Elisa.

Elisa was folding fleece for baling, and making a bad job of it. She seemed distracted, barely even noticing Egwene, and Egwene knew why. Elisa was eighteen, but her waist-length hair was still tied with a blue kerchief. Not that that was she was thinking about getting married - most girls waited at least a few years - but she was a year older than Nynaeve. Elisa often worried aloud about why the Women's Circle still thought she was too young. It was hard not to feel sympathy. Especially since Egwene had been thinking about Elisa's predicament for weeks, now.

Well, not about Elisa's problem, exactly, but it had set her thinking.

Off to one side of the tables, Calle Coplin was talking with some young men from the farms, giggling and twisting her skirts. She was always talking to some man or other, but she was

supposed to be folding fleece. That was not why she caught Egwene's eye, though.

"Elisa, you shouldn't worry so," she said gently. "Maybe Berowyn and Alene got their hair braided at sixteen . . ."

Most girls did, she thought. She was not all sympathy.

Elisa had a habit of offering sayings. "The hour wasted won't be found again," or "A smile makes the work lighter," till your teeth started to ache from them. Egwene knew for a fact that a smile would not make her bucket lighter by one dipperful ". . . but Calle's twenty, with her nameday coming in a few months now. Her hair's not braided, and you don't see her moping."

Elisa's hands went still on the fleece on the table in front of her. For some reason, the women on either side of her put their hands over their mouths, trying to hide laughter.

For some reason, Elisa's face turned bright red. Very bright red.

"Children should not . . ." Elisa spluttered. Her face might be burning like the sun, but for all her spluttering her voice was cold as mid-winter snow. "A child who talks when Children who . . ." Jillie Lewin, a year younger than Elisa and her black hair in a thick braid that hung below her waist, sank to her knees, she was laughing into her hand so hard. "Go away, child!" Elisa snapped. "Grownups are tying to work here!"

With an indignant glare, Egwene turned and stalked away from the folding tables, the bucket thumping her leg at every step. Try to help someone, try to buck up her spirits, and see what you got? I should have told her she isn't a grownup, she thought fiercely. Not until the Circle lets her braid her hair, she

isn't. That's what I should have said.

The fierce mood stayed with her until her bucket was empty again, and when she filled it once more, she squared her shoulders. If you were going to do a thing, then you had to do it. Heading straight for the sheep-pens, she walked as fast as she could and ignored anyone who motioned for water. It was not slacking off. The boys would need water, too.

At the pens, the dozen or so boys waiting to move sheep gave her surprised looks when she offered the dipper, and some said they could get water when they went to the river, but she kept on. And she always asked the same question. "Have you seen Perrin? Or Mat? Where can I find them?"

Some told her Perrin and Mat were herding sheep to the river, and others that they had seen the pair of them watching sheep that had already been shorn, but she did not mean to go chasing off just to find them already gone.

Finally, a big-eyed boy named Wil al'Seen, from one of the farms south of Emond's Field, gave her a suspicious look and said, "Why do you want them?" Some girls said Wil was pretty, but Egwene thought his ears looked funny.

She started to give him a level look, then thought better of it. I . . . need to ask them something," she said. It was only a small lie. She really did hope one of them would lead her to some answers. He said nothing for a long time, studying her, and she waited. Patience is always repaid, Elisa often said. Too often. She wished she could forget Elisa's sayings. She tried to forget. But kicking Wil's shins would not get what she wanted from him. Even if he did deserve it.

"They're over behind that far pen," he said finally, jerking

his head toward the east side of the meadow. "The one with the sheep that have Paet al'Caar's ear-marks." The boys herding sheep had to talk that way, even if it was not really proper, or no one would know whether they were talking about Paet al'Caar's sheep or Jac al'Caar's or sheep belonging to one of a dozen other al'Caars. "They're just taking a rest, mind. Now, don't you go getting them in hot water by telling anybody different."

"Thank you, Wil," she said, just to show that she could be polite even to a woolhead. As if she would run carrying tales! He looked startled, and she thought about kicking his shins anyway.

The large pen holding Paet al'Caar's shorn sheep was almost to the trees on the Waterwood side of the meadow.

Master al'Caar's big black sheep-dog raised her head from where she was lying in front of the pen and watched Egwene approach for a moment before settling back down.

Egwene eyed the sheep-dog warily. She did not like dogs very much, and they did not seem to care for her, either. The dog went out of her head completely, though, once she was close enough to see clearly. The split wooden railings of the pen gave little concealment, and she could see a group of boys behind the pen. She could not really make out who they were, though.

Setting her bucket down carefully, she walked along the side of the sheep-pen. Not sneaking. She just did not want to make too much noise, in case In case noise might startle the sheep; that was it. At the corner of the pen, she peeked around the cornerpost.

Perrin was there, and Mat Cauthon, just as Wil had said, and some other boys about the same age, all with their shirts unlaced and sweaty. There was Dav Ayellin and Urn Thane, Ban Crawe

and Elam Dowtry. And Rand, a skinny boy, almost as tall as Perrin, with hands and feet that were too big for his size. He could always be found with Mat or Perrin sooner or later. Rand, who everybody said she would marry one day. They were talking and laughing and punching one another on the shoulder. Why did boys do that?

Glowering, she pulled back from the cornerpost and leaned back against the railings. One of the sheep inside the pen snuffled at her back, but she ignored it. She had heard women say that about her and Rand, but she had not known that everybody said it. Drat Elisa! If Elisa had not started sighing and moaning over her hair, Egwene would never have started thinking about husbands. She expected she would marry one day - most women in the Two Rivers did - but she was not like those scatterbrains she heard going on about how they could hardly wait. Most women waited at least a few years after their hair was braided, and she . . . She wanted to see those lands that Jain Farstrider had written about. How would a husband feel about that? About his wife going off to see strange lands. Nobody ever left the Two Rivers, as far as she knew.

I will, she vowed silently.

Even if she did marry, would Rand make a good husband? She was not sure what made a good husband.

Someone like her father, brave and kind and wise. She thought Rand was kind. He had carved her a whistle once, and a horse, and he had given her an eagle's black-tipped feather when she said it was pretty, though she still suspected he had wanted to keep it for himself. And he watched his father's sheep in pasture, so he had to be brave. The sheep-dog would help, if wolves came, or a bear, but the boy watching had to be ready with his sling, or a bow if he was old enough. Only . . . She saw him

every time he and his father came in from their farm, but she did not really know him. She hardly knew anything about him. Now was as good a time as any to start learning. She eased back to the cornerpost and peeked around it again.

"I'd like to a be a king," Rand was saying. "That's what I'd like to be." He flourished his arm and made an awkward bow, laughing to show that he was joking. A good thing, too. Egwene grimaced. A king! She studied his face. No, he was not pretty. Well, perhaps he was. Maybe it did not matter. But it might be nice to have a husband she liked to look at. His eyes were blue. No, gray. They seemed to change while you watched. Nobody else in the Two Rivers had blue eyes. Sometimes his eyes looked sad.

His mother had died when he was little, and Egwene thought he envied boys who had mothers. She could not imagine losing her mother. She did not even want to try.

"A king of sheep!" Mat hooted. He was smaller than the others, always bouncing on his toes. One glance at his face, and you knew he was looking for mischief. He always looked for mischief. And usually found it. "Rand al'Thor, King of the Sheep." Lem snickered. Ban punched him on the shoulder, and Lem punched Ban back, and then they both snickered. Egwene shook her head.

"It's better than saying you want to run off and never have to work," Rand said mildly. He never seemed to get angry. Not that she had seen, anyway. "How could you live without working, Mat?"

"Sheep aren't so bad," Elam said, rubbing at his long nose. His hair was cut short, and he had a cowlick that stood up at the back. He looked a little like a sheep.

"I'll rescue an Aes Sedai, and she'll reward me," Mat shot back. "Anyway, I don't go around looking for work when there's more than work enough without looking." He grinned and poked Perrin's shoulder.

Perrin rubbed his nose, abashed. "Sometimes you have to be sensible, Mat," he said slowly. "Sometimes you have to think ahead." Perrin always talked slowly, when he talked at all. And he moved carefully, as if he was afraid he might break something. Rand spoke before he thought, sometimes, and he always looked as though he was ready to start haring off and not stop until he caught the horizon.

"'Sensible' says I'll work in my da's mill," Lem sighed. "Inherit it one day, I expect. Not too soon, I hope. I'd like to have an adventure first, though, wouldn't you, Rand?"

"Of course." Rand laughed. "But where do I find an adventure in the Two Rivers?"

"There has to be a way," Ban muttered. "Maybe there's gold up in the mountains. Or Trollocs?" He suddenly sounded as if he was not so certain about going up in the mountains. Did he really believe in Trollocs?

"I want to have more sheep than anybody in the whole Two Rivers," Elam said stoutly. Mat rolled his eyes in exasperation.

Dav had been sitting back on his heels listening, and now he shook his head. "You look like a sheep, Elam," he muttered. At least she had not said it aloud. Dav was taller than Mat, and stockier, but his eyes had that same light.

His clothes were always rumpled from something he should

not have been doing. "Listen, I just got a great idea."

"I just got a better one," Mat put in quickly. "Come on. I'll show you." He and Dav glared at one another.

Elam and Ban and Lem looked ready to follow either one, or both, if they could figure out how. Rand put a hand on Mat's shoulder, though. "Hold on. Let's hear these great ideas, first." Perrin nodded thoughtfully.

Egwene sighed. Dav and Mat seemed to compete to see who could get into the most trouble. And Rand might sound sensible, but when he was around the village, they often managed to pull him along, too. And Perrin, as well.

The other three would fall in with anything at all Mat or Dav suggested.

It seemed time for her to leave. She would not be able to follow them to see what they were getting up to, not without them seeing her. She would die before she let Rand suspect that she had been watching him like some goosebrain. And I didn't even learn anything.

As she walked back along the sheep-pen to where she had left her bucket, Dannil Lewin passed her, heading toward the back of the pen. At thirteen, he was even skinnier than Rand, with a thrusting nose. She hesitated over the bucket, listening. At first, she heard nothing but murmurs Then

"The Mayor wants me?" Mat exclaimed. "He can't want me! I haven't done anything!"

"He wants all of you, and double quick," Dannil said. "I'd get over to him now, if it was me."

Quickly picking up the bucket, Egwene walked slowly away from the sheep-pen, back toward the river. Rand and the others soon passed her, trotting in the same direction.

Egwene smiled, a small smile. When her father sent for people, they came. Even the Women's Circle knew Brandelwyn al'Vere was no man to trifle with. Egwene was not supposed to know that, but she had overheard Mistress Luhhan and Mistress Ayellin and some of the others talking to her mother about her father being stubborn and how her mother had to do something about it.

She let the boys get a little ahead - just a little - then increased her pace to keep up.

"I don't understand it," Mat grumbled as they came near the line of men shearing. "Sometimes the Mayor knows what I'm doing as soon as I do it. My mother does it, too. But how?"

"The Women's Circle probably tells your mother," Dav muttered. "They see everything. And the Mayor's the Mayor." The other boys nodded glumly.

Ahead of them Egwene saw her father, a round man with thinning gray hair, his shirtsleeves rolled up past his elbows, a pipe in his teeth, and a set of shears in his hand.

And ten paces off from the sheep shearers, watching the boys approach, stood Mistress Cauthon, Mat's mother, flanked by her two daughters, Bodewhin and Eldrin.

Natti Cauthon was a calm, collected woman, as she would have to be with a son like Mat, and at the moment she wore a contented smile. Bodewhin and Eldrin wore almost identical

smiles, and they watched Mat twice as hard as his mother did. Bode was not quite old enough to carry water, yet, and it would be two years before Eldrin could. Rand and the others must be blind! Egwene thought. Anyone with eyes could see how Mistress Cauthon always knew.

Mistress Cauthon and her daughters slipped away into the crowd as the boys approached Egwene's father. None of the boys appeared to notice her. They all had eyes for no one but Egwene's father. All but Mat looked wary; he wore a big grin that made him look guilty of something, for sure.

Rand's father glanced up from the sheep he was bent over, and caught Rand's eye with a smile that made Rand, at least, seem less like a heron ready to take flight.

Egwene began offering water to the men shearing with her father, all of them on the Village Council. Well, Master Cole appeared to be taking a nap with his back against a waist-high stone thrusting out of the ground. He was as old as the Wisdom, maybe older, though he still had all of his hair, white as it was. But the others were shearing, the fleece falling away from the sheep in thick white sheets.

Master Buie, the thatcher, a gnarled man but spry, muttered under his breath as he worked, and the others did two sheep to his one, but everyone else seemed caught up in the work. When a man was done, he let the sheep go to be gathered up by waiting boys and herded away while another was brought to him. Egwene went slowly, to have an excuse to linger. She was not really slacking; she just wanted to know what was going to happen.

Her father studied the boys for a moment, pursing his lips, then said, "Well, lads, I know you've been working hard." Mat gave Rand a startled look, and Perrin shrugged his shoulders

uncomfortably. Rand just nodded, but uncertainly. "So I thought it might be time for that story I promised you," her father finished. Egwene grinned. Her father told the best stories.

Mat straightened up. "I want a story with adventures." The look he shot at Rand this time was defiant.

"I want Aes Sedai and Warders," Dav said hurriedly.

"I want Trollocs," Mat added, "and . . . and . . . and a false Dragon!"

Dav opened his mouth, and closed it again without saying anything. He glared at Mat, though. There was no way for him to top a false Dragon, and he knew it.

Egwene's father chuckled. "I'm no gleeman, lads. I don't know any stories like that. Tam? Would you like to give it a try?"

Egwene blinked. Why would Rand's father know stories like that if her father did not? Master al'Thor had been chosen to the Council to speak for the farmers around Emond's Field, but as far she knew, all he had ever done was farm sheep and tabac like anyone else.

Master al'Thor looked troubled, and Egwene began to hope he did not know any stories like that. She did not want anyone to show up her father. Of course, she liked Rand's father, so she did not want him embarrassed, either.

He was a sturdy man with gray flecks in his hair, a quiet man, and just about everybody liked him.

Master al'Thor finished shearing his sheep, and as he was brought another, he exchanged smiles with Rand. "As it

happens," he said, "I do know a story something like that. I'll tell you about the real Dragon, not a false one."

Master Buie straightened from his half-shorn sheep so fast that the animal nearly got away from him. His eyes narrowed, though they were always pretty narrow. "We'll have none of that, Tam al'Thor," he growled in his scratchy voice. "That's nothing fit for decent ears to hear."

"Be easy, Cenn," Egwene's father said soothingly. "It's only a story." But he glanced toward Rand's father, and plainly he was not quite as certain as he sounded.

"Some stories shouldn't be told," Master Buie insisted. "Some stories shouldn't be known! It isn't decent, I say. I don't like it. If they need to hear about wars, give them something about the War of the Hundred Years, or Trolloc Wars. That'll give them Aes Sedai and Trollocs, if you have to talk about such things. Or the Aiel War." For a moment, Egwene thought Master al'Thor's face changed.

For an instant he seemed harder. Hard enough to make the merchants' guards look soft. She was imagining a lot of things, today. She did not usually allow her imagination to run away with her this way.

Master Cole's eyes popped open. "It's just a story he'll be telling them, Cenn. Just a story, man." His eyes drifted shut again. You could never tell when Master Cole was really napping.

"You never heard, smelled or saw anything you did like, Cenn," Master al'Dai said. He was Bili's grandfather, a lean man with wispy white hair, and as old as Master Cole, if not older. He had to walk with a stick most of the time, but his eyes were clear and sharp, and so was his mind. He was almost as quick with the

wool-shears as Master al'Thor. "My advice to you, Cenn, is chew on your liver in silence and let Tam get on with it."

Master Buie subsided with a bad grace, muttering under his breath. Scowling at Rand's father, he bent back to his sheep. Egwene shook her head in surprise. She had often heard Master Buie telling people how important he was on the Council, and how all the other men always listened to him.

The boys moved closer to Master al'Thor and squatted on their heels in a semi-circle. Any story that caused an argument on the Council was sure to be of interest. Master al'Thor carried on with his shearing, but at a slower pace.

He would not want to risk cutting the sheep with his attention divided.

"It is just a story," he said, ignoring Master Buie's scowls, "because no one knows everything that happened. But it really did happen. You've heard of the Age of Legends?"

Some of the boys nodded, doubtfully. Egwene nodded, too, in spite of herself. She had heard grownups say, "Maybe in the Age of Legends," when they did not believe something had really happened or doubted a thing could be done. It was just another way saying, "When pigs had wings," though. At least, she had thought it was.

"Three thousand years ago and more, it was," Rand's father went on. "There were great cities full of buildings taller than the White Tower, and that's taller than anything but a mountain. Machines that used the One Power carried people across the ground faster than a horse can run, and some say machines carried people through the air, too. There was no sickness anywhere. No hunger. No war. And then the Dark One touched

the World."

The boys jumped, and Elam actually fell over. He scrambled back up, blushing and trying to pretend he had not toppled at all. Egwene held her breath. The Dark One. Maybe it was because she had been thinking about him earlier, but he seemed particularly frightening now. She hoped that Master al'Thor would not actually name him. He wouldn't name the Dark One, she thought, but that did not stop her being afraid that he might.

Master al'Thor smiled at the boys to soften the shock of what he had said, but he went on. "The Age of Legends hadn't so much as the memory of war, so they say, but once the Dark One touched the world, they learned fast enough. This wasn't a war like those you hear about when the merchants come for wool and tabac, between two nations. This war covered the whole world. The War of the Shadow, it came to be called. Those who stood for the Light faced as many who stood for the Shadow, and besides Darkfriends beyond counting, there were armies of Myrddraal and Trollocs greater than anything the Blight spewed up during the Trolloc Wars. Aes Sedai went over to the Shadow, too. They were called the Forsaken."

Egwene shivered, and was glad to see some of the boys wrapping their arms around themselves. Mothers used the Forsaken to frighten their children when they were bad. If you keep lying, Semirhage will come and get you. Lanfear waits for children who steal. Egwene was glad her mother did not do that. Wait. The Forsaken had been Aes Sedai? She hoped Master al'Thor did not say that too freely, or the Women's Circle would come calling on him. Anyway, some of the Forsaken were men, so he had to be wrong.

"You'll be expecting me to tell you about the glories of battle, but I won't." For a moment, he sounded grim, but only for

a moment. "No one knows anything about those battles, except that they were huge. Maybe the Aes Sedai have some records, but if they do, they don't let anyone see them except other Aes Sedai. You've heard about the great battles during Artur Hawkwing's rise, and during the War of the Hundred Years? A hundred thousand men on each side?" Eager nods answered him. From Egwene, too, though hers was not eager. All those men trying to kill one another did not excite her the way it did the boys. "Well," Master al'Thor went on, "those battles would have been counted small in the War of the Shadow. Whole cities were destroyed, razed to the ground. The countryside outside the cities fared as badly. Wherever a battle was fought, it left only devastation and rain behind. The war went on for years and years, all over the world. And slowly the Shadow began to win. The Light was pushed back and back, until it appeared certain the Shadow would conquer everything. Hope faded away like mist in the sun. But the Light had a leader who would never give up, a man called Lews Therin Telamon. The Dragon."

One of the boys gasped in surprise. Egwene was too busy goggling to see who. She forgot even to pretend that she was offering water. The Dragon was the man who had destroyed everything!

She did not know much about the Breaking of the World - well, almost nothing, in truth - but everybody knew that much. Surely he had fought for the Shadow!

"Lews Therin gathered men around him, the Hundred Companions, and a small army. Small as they counted such things then. Ten thousand men. Not a small army now, would you say?" The words seemed an invitation to laugh, but there was no laughter in Master al'Thor's quiet voice.

He sounded almost as though he had been there.

Egwene certainly did not laugh, and none of the boys did, either. She listened, and tried to remember to breathe.

"With only a forlorn hope, Lews Therin attacked the valley of Thakan'dar, the heart of the Shadow itself. Trollocs in the hundreds of thousands fell on them, Trollocs and Myrddraal. Trollocs live to kill. A Trolloc can rip a man to pieces with its bare hands. Myrddraal are death. Aes Sedai fighting for the Shadow rained fire and lightning on Lews Therin and his men. The men following the Dragon did not die one by one, but ten at a time, or twenty, or fifty. Beneath a twisted sky, in a place where nothing grew or ever would again, they fought and died. But they did not retreat or give up. All the way to Shayol Ghul they fought, and if Thakan'dar is the heart of the Shadow, then Shayol Ghul is the heart of the heart. Every man in that army died, and most of the Hundred Companions, but at Shayol Ghul they sealed the Dark One back into the prison the Creator made for him, and the Forsaken with him. And the world was saved from the Dark One."

Silence fell. The boys stared at Master al'Thor with wide eyes. Shining eyes, as if they could see it all, the Trollocs and the Myrddraal and Shayol Ghul. Egwene shivered again. The Dark One and all the Forsaken are bound at Shayol Ghul, bound away from the world of men, she recited to herself. She could not remember the rest, but it helped. Only, if the Dragon had saved the world, how had he destroyed it?

Cenn Buie spat. He spat! Just like some merchant's smelly guard! She did not believe she would think of him as Master Buie again after today.

That broke the boys out of their reverie, of course. They tried to look anywhere but at the gnarled man.

Perrin scratched at his head. "Master al'Thor," he said slowly, "what does 'the Dragon' mean? If somebody's called the Lion, it means he's supposed to be like a lion. But what's a dragon?"

Egwene stared at him. She had never thought of that. Maybe Perrin was not as slow as he appeared.

"I don't know," Rand's father answered simply. "I don't think anyone does. Maybe not even the Aes Sedai." He let the sheep go that he been shearing, and motioned for another to be brought. Egwene realized that he had been done with it for some, time. He must not have wanted to interrupt his story.

Master Cole opened his eyes and grinned. "The Dragon. It surely sounds fierce, though, now doesn't it?" he said before letting his eyes drift shut again.

"I suppose it does at that," her father said. "But it all happened long ago and far away, and it doesn't have anything to do with us. Well, you've had your break and your story, lads. Back to work with you." As the boys began standing up reluctantly, he added, "There are plenty of lads here from the farms I don't think any of you know, yet. It's always good to know your neighbors, so you should acquaint yourselves with them. I don't want any of you working together today; you already know one another. Now, off with you."

The boys exchanged startled glances. Had they really thought he would let them go back to whatever mischief they had been planning? Mat and Dav looked especially glum as they walked away exchanging glances. She thought about following, but they were already splitting up, and she would have to trail after Rand to learn anything more. She grimaced. If he noticed, he might think she was goosebrained like Cilia Cole. Besides,

there were those far-off lands. She did intend to see them.

Abruptly she became aware of ravens, many more than there had been before, flapping out of the trees, flying away west, toward the Mountains of Mist. She shifted her shoulders. She felt as if someone were staring at her back.

Someone, or

She did not want to turn around, but she did, raising her eyes to the trees behind the men shearing. Midway up a tall pine, a solitary raven stood on a branch. Staring at her. Right at her! She felt cold right down to her middle. The only thing she wanted to do was run. Instead, she made herself stare back, trying to copy Nynaeve's level look.

After a moment the raven gave a harsh cry and threw itself off the branch, black wings carrying it west after the others.

Maybe I'm starting to get that look right, she thought, and then felt silly. She had to stop letting her imagination get the better of her. It was just a bird. And she had important things to do, like being the best water-carrier ever. The best water-carrier ever would not be frightened of birds or anything else. Squaring her shoulders, she set out through the crowd again, watching for Berowyn. But this time, it was so she could offer Berowyn the dipper. If she could face down a raven, she could face down her sister. She hoped.

Egwene had to carry water again the next year, which was a great disappointment to her, but once again she tried to be the best. If you were going to do a thing, you might as well do the best you could. It must have worked, because the year after that she was allowed to help with the food, a year early! She set herself a new goal, then: to be allowed to braid her hair younger

than anybody ever. She did not really think the Women's Circle would allow it, but a goal that was easy was no goal at all.

She stopped wanting to hear stories from the grownups, though she would have liked to hear a gleeman, but she still liked to read of distant lands with strange ways, and dreamed of seeing them. The boys stopped wanting stories, too. She did not think they even read very much. They all grew older, thinking their world would never change, and many of those stories faded to fond memories while others were forgotten, or half so. And if they learned that some of those stories really had been more than stories, well The War of the Shadow? The Breaking of the World? Lews Therin Telamon? How could it matter now? And what had really happened back then, anyway?