

JORDAN, Robert - Snow - Prolouge to Winter's Heart

SNOW:

The Prolouge to WINTER'S HEART

Three lanterns cast a flickering light, more than enough to illuminate the small room with its stark white walls and ceiling, but Seaine kept her eyes fixed on the heavy wooden door. Illogical, she knew; foolish in a Sitter for the White. The weave of saidar she had pushed around the jamb brought her occasional whispers of distant footsteps in the warren of hallways outside, whispers that faded away almost as soon as heard. A simple thing learned from a friend in her long-ago novice days, but she would have warning long before anyone came near. Few people came down as deep as the second basement, anyway.

Her weave picked up the far-off chittering of rats. Light! How long since there had been rats in Tar Valon, in the Tower itself? Were any of them spies for the Dark One? She wet her lips uneasily. Logic counted for nothing in this. True. If illogical. She wanted to laugh. With an effort she crept back from the brink of hysteria. Think of something besides rats. Something besides... A muffled squeal rose in the room behind her, faltered into muted whimpering, She tried to stop up her ears. Concentrate!

In a way, she and her companions had been led to this room because the heads of the Ajahs seemed to be meeting in secret. She herself had glimpsed Ferane Neheran whispering in a secluded nook of the library with Jesse Bilal, who stood very high among the Browns if not at the very top. She thought she stood on firmer ground with Suana Dragand, of the Yellows. She thought so. But why had Ferane gone walking with Suana in a secluded part of the Tower grounds, both swathed in plain cloaks? Sitters of different Ajahs still talked to one another openly, if coldly. The others had

seen similar things; they would not give names from their own Ajahs, of course, but two had mentioned Ferane. A troubling puzzle. The Tower was a seething swamp these days, every Ajah at every other Ajah's throat, yet the heads met in corners. No one outside an Ajah knew for certain who within it led, but apparently the leaders knew each other, What could they be up to? What? It was unfortunate that she could not simply ask Ferane, but even had Ferane been tolerant of anyone's questions, she did not dare. Not now.

Concentrate as she would, Seaine could not keep her mind on the question. She knew she was staring at the door and worrying at puzzles she could not solve just to avoid looking over her shoulder. Toward the source of those stifled whimpers and snuffling groans.

As if thinking of the sounds compelled her, she looked back slowly to her companions, her breath growing more uneven as her head moved by inches. Snow was falling heavily on Tar Valon, far overhead, but the room seemed unaccountably hot. She made herself see!

Brown-fringed shawl looped on her elbows, Saerin stood with her feet planted apart, fingering the hilt of the curved Altaran dagger thrust behind her belt. Cold anger darkened her olive complexion enough to make the scar along her jaw stand out in a pale line. Pevara appeared calmer, at first glance, yet one hand gripped her red-embroidered skirts tightly and the other held the smooth white cylinder of the Oath Rod like a foot-long club she was ready to use. She might be ready; Pevara was far tougher than her plump exterior suggested, and determined enough to make Saerin seem a shirker.

On the other side of the Chair of Remorse, tiny Yukiri had her arms wrapped tightly around herself; the long silvery-gray fringe on her shawl trembled with her shivers. Licking her lips, Yukiri cast a worried glance at the woman standing beside her,

Doesine, looking more like a pretty boy than a Yellow sister of considerable repute, displayed no reaction to what they were doing. She was the one actually manipulating the weaves that stretched into the Chair, and she stared at the ter'angreal, focusing so hard on her work that perspiration beaded on her pale forehead. They were all Sitters, including the tall woman writhing on the Chair.

Sweat drenched Talene, matting her golden hair, soaking her linen shift till it clung to her. The rest of her clothes made a jumbled pile in a corner. Her closed eyelids fluttered, and she let out a constant stream of strangled moans and mewling, half-uttered pleas. Seaine felt ill, but could not drag her eyes away. Talene was a friend. Had been a friend.

Despite its name, the ter'angreal looked nothing like a chair, just a large rectangular block of marbled gray. No one knew what it was made of, but the material

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was hard as steel everywhere except the slanted top. The statuesque Green sank a little into that, and somehow it molded itself to her no matter how she twisted.

Doesine's weavings flowed into the only break anywhere on the Chair, a palm-sized rectangular hole in one side with tiny notches spaced unevenly around it. Criminals caught in Tar Valon were brought down here to experience the Chair of Remorse, to experience carefully selected consequences of their crimes, On release, they invariably Red the island. There was very little crime in Tar Valon. Queasily, Seaine wondered whether this was anything like the use the Chair had been put to in the Age of Legends.

"What is she... seeing?" Her question came out a whisper in spite of herself. Talene would be more than seeing; to her, it all would seem real. Thank the Light she had

no Warder, almost unheard of for a Green, She had claimed a Sitter had no need for one. Different reasons came to mind, now.

"She is bloody being flogged by bloody Trollocs," Doesine said hoarsely, Touches of her native Cairhien had appeared in her voice, something that seldom happened except under stress. "When they are done.... She can see the Trollocs' cook kettle boiling over a fire, and a Myrddraal watching her. She must know it will be one or the other next. Burn me, if she doesn't break this time..." Doesine brushed perspiration from her forehead irritably and drew a ragged breath. "Stop joggling my elbow. It has been a long while since I did this."

"Three times under," Yukiri muttered. "The toughest strongarm is broken by his own guilt, if nothing else, after two! What if she's innocent? Light, this is like stealing sheep with the shepherd watching!" Even shaking, she managed to appear regal, but she always sounded like what she had been, a village woman, She glared around at the rest of them in a sickly fashion, "The law forbids using the Chair on initiates. We'll all be unchained! And if being thrown out of the Hall isn't enough, we'll probably be exiled. And birched before we go, just to drop salt in our tea! Burn me, if we're wrong, we could all be stilled."

Seaine shuddered. They would escape that last, if their suspicions proved right. No, not suspicions; certainties. They had to be right! But even if they were, Yukiri was correct about the rest. Tower law seldom allowed for necessity, or any supposed higher good. If they were right, though, the price was worth paying. Please, the Light send they were right!

"Are you blind and deaf." Pevara snapped, shaking the Oath Rod at Yukiri. "She refused to reswear the Oath against speaking an untrue word, and it had to be more than stupid Green Ajah pride after we'd all done as much already. When I shielded her, she tried to stab me! Does that shout innocence? Does it? For all she knew, we

just meant to talk at her until our tongues dried up! What reason would she have to expect more?"

"Thank you both," Saerin put in dryly, "For stating the obvious. It's too late to go back, Yukiri, so we might as well go forward. And if I were you, Pevara, I wouldn't be shouting at one of the four women in the whole Tower I knew I could trust."

Yukiri flushed and shifted her shawl, and Pevara looked a trifle abashed. A trifle.

They might all be Sitters, but Saerin had most definitely taken charge. Seaine was unsure how she felt about that. A few hours ago, she and Pevara had been two old friends alone on a dangerous quest, equals reaching decisions together; now they had allies, She should be grateful for more companions. They were not in the Hall, though, and they could not claim Sitter's rights on this. Tower hierarchies had taken over, all the subtle and not-so-subtle distinctions as to who stood where with respect to whom. In truth, Saerin had been both novice and Accepted twice as long as most of them, but forty years as a Sitter, longer than anyone else in the Hall, counted for a great deal, Seaine would be lucky if Saerin asked her opinion, much less her advice, before deciding anything at all. Foolish, yet the knowledge pricked like a thorn in her foot.

"The Trollocs are dragging her toward the kettle," Doesine said suddenly, her voice grating, A thin keening escaped through Talene's clenched teeth; she shook so hard she seemed to vibrate, "I - I do not know if I can... can flaming make myself...."

"Bring her awake," Saerin commanded without so much as glancing at anyone else to see what they thought. "Stop sulking, Yukiri, and be ready."

The Gray gave her a proud, furious stare, but when Doesine let her weaves fade and Talene's blue eyes fluttered open, the glow of saidar surrounded Yukiri and she shielded the woman lying on the Chair without uttering a word. Saerin was in charge,

and everyone knew it, and that was that. A very sharp thorn,

A shield hardly seemed necessary, Her face a mask of terror, Talene trembled and

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panted as though she had run ten miles at top speed. She still sank into the soft surface, but without Doesine channeling, it no longer formed itself to her. Talene stared at the ceiling with bulging eyes, then squeezed them shut, but they popped right open again. Whatever memories lay behind her eyelids were nothing she wanted to face.

Covering the two strides to the Chair, Pevara thrust the Oath Rod at the distraught woman. "Forswear all oaths that bind you and retake the Three Oaths, Talene," she said harshly. Talene recoiled from the Rod as from a poisonous serpent, then jerked the other way as Saerin bent over her.

"Next time, Talene, it's the cookpot for you. Or the Myrddraal's tender attentions." Saerin's face was implacable, but her tone made it seem soft by comparison. "No waking up before. And if that doesn't do, there'll be another time, and another, as many as it takes if we must stay down here until summer." Doesine opened her mouth in protest before giving over with a grimace. Only she among them knew how to operate the Chair, but in this group, she stood as low as Seaine.

Talene continued to stare up at Saerin. Tears filled her big eyes, and she began to weep, great shuddering, hopeless sobs. Blindly, she reached out, groping until Pevara stuck the Oath Rod into her hand. Embracing the Source, Pevara channeled a thread of Spirit to the Rod. Talene gripped the wrist-thick rod so hard that her knuckles turned white, yet she just lay there sobbing,

Saerin straightened. "I fear it's time to put her back to sleep, Doesine."

Talene's tears redoubled, but she mumbled through them. "I - forswear - all oaths -

that bind me." With the last word, she began to howl.

Seaine jumped, then swallowed hard. She personally knew the pain of removing a single oath and had speculated on the agony of removing more than one at once, but now the reality was in front of her. Talene screamed till there was no breath left in her, then pulled in air only to scream again, until Seaine half expected people to come running down from the Tower itself. The tall Green convulsed, flinging her arms and legs about, then suddenly arched up till only her heels and head touched the gray surface, every muscle clenched, her whole body spasming wildly.

As abruptly as the seizure had begun, Talene collapsed bonelessly and lay there weeping like a lost child. The Oath Rod rolled from her limp hand down the sloping gray surface. Yukiri murmured something with the sound of a fervent prayer. Doesine kept whispering "Light!" over and over in a shaken voice. "Light! Light!"

Pevara scooped up the Rod and closed Talene's fingers around it again. There was no mercy in Seaine's friend, not in this matter. "Now swear the Three Oaths," she spat.

For an instant, it seemed Talene might refuse, but slowly she repeated the oaths that made them all Aes Sedai and held them together. To speak no word that was not true. Never to make a weapon for one man to kill another. Never to use the One Power as a weapon, except in defence of her life, or that of her Warder or another sister.

At the end, she began weeping in silence, shaking without a sound. Perhaps it was the oaths tightening down on her. They were uncomfortable when fresh. Perhaps,

Then Pevara told the other oath they required of her. Talene flinched, but muttered the words in tones of hopelessness. "I vow to obey all five of you absolutely."

Otherwise, she only stared straight ahead dully, tears trailing down her cheeks.

"Answer me truthfully," Saerin told her. "Are you of the Black Ajah?"

"I am." The words creaked, as if Talene's throat were rusty.

The simple words froze Seaine in a way she had never expected. She had set out to hunt the Black Ajah, after all, and believed in her quarry as many sisters did not. She had laid hands on another sister, on a Sitter, had helped bundle Talene along deserted basement hallways wrapped in flows of Air, had broken a dozen Tower laws, committed serious crimes, all to hear an answer she had been nearly certain of before the question was asked. Now she had heard. The Black Ajah really did exist. She was staring at a Black sister, a Darkfriend who wore the shawl. And believing turned out to be a pale shadow of confronting. Only her jaw clenched near to cramping kept her teeth from chattering. She struggled to compose herself, to think rationally. But nightmares were awake and walking the Tower.

Someone exhaled heavily, and Seaine realized she was not the only one who found her world turned upside down. Yukiri gave herself a shake, then fixed her eyes on Talene as though determined to hold the shield on her by willpower if need be. Doesine was licking her lips, and smoothing her dark golden skirts uncertainly. Only Saerin and Pevara appeared at ease.

"So," Saerin said softly. Perhaps "faintly" was a better word. "So. Black Ajah." She drew a deep breath, and her tone became brisk. "There's no more need for that,

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Yukiri, Talene, you won't try to escape, or resist in any way. You won't so much as touch the Source without permission from one of us. Though I suppose someone else will take this forward once we hand you over. Yukiri?" The shield on Talene dissipated, but the glow remained around Yukiri, as if she did not trust the effect of the Rod on a Black sister.

Pevara frowned. "Before we give her to Elaida, Saerin, I want to dig out as much as we can. Names, places, anything. Everything she knows!" Darkfriends had killed

Pevara's entire family, and Seaine was sure she would go into exile ready to hunt down every last Black sister personally.

Still huddled on the Chair, Talene made a sound, half bitter laugh, half weeping.

"When you do that, we are all dead. Dead! Elaida is Black Ajah!"

"That's impossible." Seaine burst out. "Elaida gave me the order herself."

"She must be," Doesine half whispered. "Talene's sworn the oaths again; she just named her!" Yukiri nodded vehemently.

"Use your heads," Pevara growled, shaking her own in disgust. "You know as well as I do if you believe a lie, you can say it for truth."

"And that is truth," Saerin said firmly, "What proof do you have, Talene? Have you seen Elaida at your... meetings?" She gripped her knife hilt so hard that her knuckles paled. Saerin had had to fight harder than most for the shawl, for the right to remain in the Tower at all, To her, the Tower was more than home, more important than her own life. If Talene gave the wrong answer, Elaida might not live to face trial.

"They don't have meetings," Talene muttered sullenly.

"Except the Supreme Council, I suppose. But she must be. They know every report she receives, even the secret ones, every word spoken to her. They know every decision she makes before it's announced. Days before; sometimes weeks. How else, unless she tells them?" Sitting up with an effort, she tried to fix them each in turn with an intent stare. It only made her eyes seem to dart anxiously. "We have to run; we have to find a place to hide. I'll help you - tell you everything I know! - but they'll kill us unless we run."

Strange, Saerin thought, how quickly Talene had made her Former cronies "they" and tried to identify herself with the rest of them. No. She was avoiding the real

problem, and avoidance was witless. Had Elaida really set her to dig out the Black Ajah? She had never once actually mentioned the name. Could she have meant something else? Elaida had always jumped down the throat of anyone who even mentioned the Black, Nearly any sister would do the same, yet....

"Elaida's proven herself a fool," Saerin said, "and more than once I've regretted standing for her, but I'll not believe she's Black, not without more than that."

Tight-lipped, Pevara jerked an agreeing nod. As a Red, she would want much more.

"That's as may be, Saerin," Yukiri said, "but we cannot hold Talene long before the Greens start asking where she is. Not to mention the... the Black. We'd better decide what to do fast, or we'll still be digging at the bottom of the well when the rains hit." Talene gave Saerin a feeble smile that was probably meant to be ingratiating. It faded under the Brown Sitter's frown.

"We don't dare tell Elaida anything until we can cripple the Black at one blow," Saerin said finally. "Don't argue, Pevara; it's sense." Pevara threw up her hands and put on a stubborn expression, but she closed her mouth. "If Talene is right," Saerin went on, "the Black knows about Seaine or soon will, so we must ensure her safety, as much as we can. That won't be easy, with only the five of us. We can't trust anyone until we are certain of them! At least we have Talene, and who knows what we'll learn before she's wrung out?" Talene attempted to look willing to be wrung out, but no one was paying her any mind. Seaine's throat had gone dry.

"We might not be entirely alone," Pevara said reluctantly, "Seaine, tell them your little scheme with Zerah and her friends."

"Scheme?" Saerin said. "Who's Zerah? Seaine? Seaine!"

Seaine gave a start, "What? Oh. Pevara and I uncovered a small nest of rebels here in the Tower," she began breathily, "Ten sisters sent to spread dissent." Saerin was going to make sure she was safe, was she? Without so much as asking. She was a

Sitter herself; she had been Aes Sedai for almost a hundred and fifty years. What right had Saerin or anyone to... ? "Pevara and I have begun putting an end to that. We've already made one of them, Zerah Dacan, take the same extra oath Talene did, and told her to bring Bernaile Gelbarn to my rooms this afternoon without rousing her suspicions." Light, any sister outside this room might be Black. Any sister.

"Then we will use those two to bring another, until they have all been made to swear

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obedience. Of course, we'll ask the same question we put to Zerah, the same we put to Talene." The Black Ajah might already have her name, already know she had been set hunting them. How could Saerin keep her safe', "Those who give the wrong answer can be questioned, and those who give the right can repay for a little of their treachery by hunting the Black under our direction," Light, how?

When she was done, the others discussed the matter at some length, which could only mean that Saerin was unsure what decision she would make. Yukiri insisted on giving Zerah and her confederates over to the law immediately - if it could be done without exposing their own situation with Talene. Pevara argued for using the rebels, though half-heartedly; the dissent they had been spreading centered around vile tales concerning the Red Ajah and false Dragons. Doesine seemed to be suggesting that they kidnap every sister in the Tower and force them all to take the added oath, but the other three paid little attention to her.

Seaine took no part in the discussion, Her reaction to their predicament was the only possible one, she thought. Tottering to the nearest corner, she vomited noisily.

Elayne tried not to grind her teeth. Outside, another blizzard pelted Caemlyn,

darkening the midday sky enough that the lamps along the sitting room's paneled walls were all lit. Fierce gusts rattled the casements set into the tall arched windows, Flashes of lightning lit the clear glass panes, and thunder boomed hollowly overhead. Thunder snow, the worst kind of winter storm, the most violent. The room was not precisely cold, but.... Spreading her fingers in front of the logs crackling in the broad marble fireplace, she could still feel a chill rising through the carpets layered over the floor tiles, and through her thickest velvet slippers, too. The wide black fox collar and cuffs on her red-and-white gown were pretty, but she was not sure they added any more to its warmth than the pearls on the sleeves. Refusing to let the cold touch her did not mean she was unaware. Where was Nynaeve? And Vandene? Her thoughts snarled like the weather. They should be here already! Light! I wish I could learn to go without sleep, and they take their sweet time! No, that was unfair. Her formal claim for the Lion Throne was only a few days old, and for her, everything else had to take second place for the time being. Nynaeve and Vandene had other priorities; other responsibilities, as they saw them. Nynaeve was up to her neck planning with Reanne and the rest of the Knitting Circle how to spirit Kinswomen out of Seanchan-controlled lands before they were discovered and collared. The Kin were very good at staying low, but the Seanchan would not just pass them by for wilders the way Aes Sedai always had, Supposedly, Vandene was still shaken by her sister's murder, barely eating and hardly able to give advice of any sort. The barely eating part was true, but finding the killer consumed her. Supposedly walking the halls in grief at odd hours, she was secretly hunting the Darkfriend among them, Three days earlier, just the thought of that could make Elayne shiver; now, it was one danger among many. More intimate than most, true, but only most. They were doing important tasks, approved and encouraged by Egwene, but she still

wished they would hurry, selfish though it might be. Vandene had a wealth of good advice, the advantage of long experience and study, and Nynaeve's years dealing with the Village Council and the Women's Circle back in Emond's Field gave her a keen eye for practical politics, however much she denied it, Burn me, I have a hundred problems, some right here in the Palace, and I need them! If she had her way, Nynaeve al'Meara was going to be the Aes Sedai advisor to the next Queen of Andor. She needed all the help she could find - help she could trust.

Smoothing her face, she turned away from the blazing hearth. Thirteen tall armchairs, carved simply but with a fine hand, made a horseshoe arc in front of the fireplace, Paradoxically, the place of honor, where the Queen would sit if receiving here, stood farthest from the fire's heat. Such as it was. Her back began to warm immediately, and her front to cool. Outside, snow fell, thunder crashed and lightning flared. Inside her head, too. Calm, A ruler had as much need of calm as any Aes Sedai.

"It must be the mercenaries," she said, not quite managing to keep regret out of her voice. Armsmen from her estates surely would begin arriving inside a month - once they learned she was alive - but the men Birgitte was recruiting would require half a year or more before they were fit to ride and handle a sword at the same time, "And Hunters for the Horn, if any will sign and swear." There were plenty of both trapped in Caemlyn by the weather. Too many of both, most people said, carousing,

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brawling, troubling women who wanted no part of their attentions. At least she would be putting them to good use, to stop trouble instead of beginning it. She wished she did not think she was still trying to convince herself of that. "Expensive, but the

coffers will cover it." For a time, they would. She had better start receiving revenues from her estates soon.

Wonder of wonders, the two women standing before her reacted in much the same fashion.

Dyelin gave an irritated grunt. A large, round silver pin worked with Taravin's Owl and Oak was fastened at the high neck of her dark green dress, her only jewellery. A show of pride in her House, perhaps too much pride; the High Seat of House Taravin was a proud woman altogether. Gray streaked her golden hair and fine lines webbed the corners of her eyes, yet her face was strong, her gaze level and sharp. Her mind was a razor. Or maybe a sword. A plainspoken woman, or so it seemed, who did not hide her opinions.

"Mercenaries know the work," she said dismissively, "but they are hard to control, Elayne. When you need a feather touch, they're liable to be a hammer, and when you need a hammer, they're liable to be elsewhere, and stealing to boot. They are loyal to gold, and only as long as the gold lasts. If they don't betray for more gold first. I'm sure this once Lady Birgitte will agree with me."

Arms folded tightly beneath her breasts and heeled boots planted wide, Birgitte grimaced, as always when anyone used her new title. Elayne had granted her an estate as soon as they reached Caemlyn, where it could be registered. In private, Birgitte grumbled incessantly over that, and the other change in her life. Her sky-blue trousers were cut the same as those she usually wore, billowing and gathered at the ankles, but her short red coat had a high white collar, and wide white cuffs banded with gold. She was the Lady Birgitte Trahelion and the Captain General of the Queen's Guard, and she could mutter and whine all she wanted, so long as she kept it private,

"I do," she growled unwillingly, and gave Dyelin a not-quite-sidelong glare. The

Warder bond carried what Elayne had been sensing all morning. Frustration, irritation, determination. Some of that might have been a reflection of herself, though. They mirrored one another in surprising ways since the bonding, emotionally and otherwise. Why, her courses had shined by more than a week to match the other woman's!

Birgitte's reluctance to take the second-best argument was clearly almost as great as her reluctance to agree.

"Hunters aren't much bloody better, Elayne," she muttered. "They took the Hunter's Oath to find adventure, and a place in the histories if they can. Not to settle down keeping the law. Half are supercilious prigs, looking down their flaming noses at everyone else; the rest don't just take necessary chances, they look for chances to take. And one whisper of a rumor of the Horn of Valere, and you'll be lucky if only two in three vanish overnight."

Dyelin smiled a thin smile, as though she had won a point. Oil and water were not in it compared to those two; each managed well enough with nearly anyone else, but for some reason they could argue over the color of charcoal. Could and would, "Besides, Hunters and mercenaries alike, nearly all are foreigners. That will sit poorly with high and low alike. Very poorly. The last thing you want is to start a rebellion."

Lightning flared, briefly lighting the casements, and a particularly loud peal of thunder punctuated her words. In a thousand years, seven Queens of Andor had been toppled by open rebellion, and the two who survived probably wished they had not, Elayne stifled a sigh, One of the small inlaid tables along the walls held a heavy silver ropework tray with cups and a tall pitcher of hot spiced wine. Lukewarm spiced wine, now, She channeled briefly, Fire, and a thin wisp of steam rose from the pitcher. Reheating gave the spices a slight bitterness, but the warmth of the

worked-silver cup in her hands was worth it. With an effort she resisted the desire to heat the air in the room with the Power and released the Source; the warmth would not have lasted unless she maintained the weaves, anyway. She had conquered her unwillingness to let go every time she took in saidar - well, to some extent - yet of late, the desire to draw more grew every time. Every sister had to face that dangerous desire. A gesture brought the others to pour their own wine.

"You know the situation," she told them. "Only a fool could think it anything but dire, and you're neither of you fools." The Guards were a shell, a handful of acceptable men and a double handful of strongarms and toughs better suited to throwing drunks out of taverns, or being thrown out themselves. And with the

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Saldaeans gone and the Aiel leaving, crime was blooming like weeds in spring. She would have thought the snow would damp it down, but every day brought robbery, arson and worse. Every day, the situation grew worse, "At this rate, we'll see riots in a few weeks. Maybe sooner. If I can't keep order in Caemlyn itself, the people will turn against me." If she could not keep order in the capital, she might as well announce to the world that she was unfit to rule. "I don't like it, but it has to be done, so it will be," Both opened their mouths, ready to argue further, but she gave them no chance, She made her voice firm. "It will be done,"

Birgitte's waist-long golden braid swung as she shook her head, yet grudging acceptance filtered through the bend. She took a decidedly odd view of their relationship as Aes Sedai and Warder, but she had learned to recognize when Elayne would not be pressed. After a fashion she had learned. There was the estate and title. And commanding the Guards. And a few other small matters, Dyelin bent her neck a fraction, and perhaps her knees; it might have been a curtsy,

yet her face was stone. It was well to remember that many who did not want Elayne Trakand on the Lion Throne wanted Dyelin Taravin instead. The woman had been nothing but helpful, but it was early days yet, and sometimes a niggling voice whispered in the back of Elayne's head. Was Dyelin simply waiting for her to bungle badly before stepping in to "save" Andor? Someone sufficiently prudent, sufficiently devious, might try that route, and might even succeed.

Elayne raised a hand to rub her temple but made it into adjusting her hair, So much suspicion, so little trust. The Game of Houses had infected Andor since she left for Tar Valon. She was grateful for her months among Aes Sedai for more than learning the Power, Daes Dae'mar was breath and bread, to most sisters. Grateful for Thom's teaching, too. Without both, she might not have survived her return as long as she had. The Light send Thom was safe, that he and Mat and the others had escaped the Seanchan and were on their way to Caemlyn. Every day since leaving Ebou Dar she prayed for their safety, but that brief prayer was all she had time for, now.

Taking the chair at the center of the arc, the Queen's chair, she tried to look like a queen, back straight, her free hand resting lightly on the carved chair arm, Looking a queen is not enough, her mother had told her often, but a fine mind, a keen grasp of affairs, and a brave heart will go for nothing if people do not see you as a queen. Birgitte was watching her closely, almost suspiciously. Sometimes the bond was decidedly inconvenient! Dyelin raised her winecup to her lips.

Elayne took a deep breath. She had harried this question from every direction she knew, and she could see no other way. "Birgitte, by spring, I want the Guards to be an army equal to anything ten Houses can put in the field," Impossible to achieve, likely, but just trying meant keeping the mercenaries who signed now and finding more, signing every man who showed the least inclination, Light, what a foul tangle!

Dyelin choked, her eyes bulging dark wine sprayed from her mouth. Still spluttering, she plucked a lace-edged handkerchief from her sleeve and dabbed at her chin.

A wave of panic shot down the bond from Birgitte. "Oh, burn me, Elayne, you can't mean...! I'm an archer, not a general! That's all I've ever been, don't you understand yet? I just did what I had to do, what circumstances forced on me! Anyway, I'm not her, anymore; I'm just me, and...!" She trailed off, realizing she might have said too much. Not for the first time. Her face went crimson as Dyelin eyed her curiously.

They had put it about that Birgitte was from Kandor, where country women wore something like her clothes, yet Dyelin clearly suspected the lie. And every time Birgitte let her tongue slip, she came closer to letting her secret slip, too.

Elaine shot her a look that promised a talking-to, later.

She would not have thought Birgitte's cheeks could get any redder. Mortification drowned everything else in the bond, wooding through until Elayne felt her own face coloring. Quickly she put on a stern expression, hoping her crimson cheeks would pass for something other than an intense desire to squirm in her seat with Birgitte's humiliation. That mirroring effect could be more than merely inconvenient!

Dyelin wasted only a moment on Birgitte. Tucking her handkerchief back in its place, she carefully set her cup back on the tray then planted her hands on her hips. Her face was a thunderhead, now, "The Guards have always been the core of Andor's army, Elayne, but this... Light's mercy, this is madness! You could turn every hand against you from the River Erinin to the Mountains of Mist!"

Elayne focused on calm. If she was wrong, Andor would become another Cairhien, another blood-soaked land filled with chaos. And she would die, of course, a price

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not high enough to meet the cost. Not trying was unthinkable, and in any case would have the same result for Andor as failure. Cool, composed, steely calm. A queen could not show herself afraid, even when she was. Especially when she was. Her mother had always said to explain decisions as seldom as possible; the more often you explained, the more explanations were necessary, until they were all you had time for. Gareth Bryne said to explain if you could; your people did better if they knew the why as well as the what. Today, she would follow Gareth Bryne, A good many victories had been won by following him.

"I have three declared challengers." And maybe one not declared. She made herself meet Dyelin's gaze. Not angrily; just eyes meeting eyes. Or maybe Dyelin did take it for anger, with her jaw tight and her face flushed. If so, so be it, "By herself, Arymilla is negligible, but Nasin has joined House Caeren to her, and whether or not he's sane, his support means she must be considered. Naeen and Elenia are imprisoned; their armsmen are not. Naeen's people may dither and argue until they find a leader, but Jarid is High Seat of Sarand, and he will take chances to feed his wife's ambition. House Baryn and House Anshar flirt with both; the best I can hope is that one goes with Sarand and one with Arawn. Nineteen Houses in Andor are strong enough that smaller Houses will follow where they lead. Six are arrayed against me, and I have two." Six so far, and the Light send she had two! She would not mention the three great Houses that had all but declared for Dyelin; at least Egwene had them tied down in Murandy for now, She motioned to a chair near her, and Dyelin sat, carefully arranging her skirts. The storm clouds had left the older woman's face. She studied Elayne, giving no hint as to her questions or conclusions, "I know all that as well as you, Elayne, but

Luan and Ellorien will bring their Houses to you, and Abelle will as well, I'm sure." A careful voice, too, but it gathered heat as she went on. "Other Houses will see reason, then. As long as you don't frighten them out of reason, Light, Elayne, this is not a Succession. Trakand succeeds Trakand, not another House, Even a Succession has seldom come to open fighting! Make the Guards into an army, and you risk everything."

Elayne threw her head back, but her laughter held no amusement, It fit right in with the peals of thunder, "I risked everything the day I came home, Dyelin. You say Norwelyn and Traemane will come to me, and Pend? Fine; then I have five to face six. I don't think the other Houses will 'see reason,' as you put it. If any of them move before it's clear as good glass the Rose Crown is mine, it will be against me, not for." With luck, those lords and ladies would shy away from associating with cronies of Gaebriel, but she did not like depending on luck. She was not Mat Cauthon. Light, most people were sure Rand had killed her mother, and few believed that "Lord Gaebriel" had been one of the Forsaken. Mending the damage Rahvin had done in Andor might take her entire lifetime even if she managed to live as long as the Kinswomen! Some Houses would stand aside from supporting her because of the outrages Gaebriel had perpetrated in Morgase's name, and others because Rand had said he intended to "give" her the throne, She loved the man to her toes, but burn him for giving voice to that! Even if it was what reined in Dyelin, The meanest crofter in Andor would shoulder his scythe to pull a puppet from the Lion Throne!

"I want to avoid Andoran killing Andoran if I can, Dyelin, but Succession or no Succession, Jarid is ready to fight, even with Elenia locked away. Naeen is ready to fight," Best to bring both women to Caemlyn as soon as possible; too much chance of them slipping messages, and orders, out of Aringill. "Arymilla is ready, with Nasin's men behind her. To them, this is a Succession, and the only way to stop them

from fighting is to be so strong they don't dare. If Birgitte can build the Guards into an army by spring, well and good, because if I don't have an army before then, I will have need of one. And if that isn't enough, remember the Seanchan. They won't be satisfied with Tanchico and Ebou Dar; they want everything. I won't let them have Andor, Dyelin, any more than I'll let Arymilla." Thunder roared overhead.

Twisting a little to look back at Birgitte, Dyelin moistened her lips. Her fingers plucked unconsciously at her skirts. Very little frightened her, but tales of the Seanchan had. What she murmured, though, as if to herself, was "I had hoped to avoid outright civil war." And that might mean nothing, or a great deal! Perhaps a little probing might show which.

"Gawyn," Birgitte said suddenly. Her expression had lightened, and so had the emotions flowing through the bond. Relief stood out strong, "When he comes, he'll take command. He'll be your First Prince of the Sword."

"Mother's milk in a cup." Elayne snapped, and lightning flared in the windows for

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emphasis. Why did the woman have to change the subject now? Dyelin gave a start, and heat flooded back into Elayne's face. By the older woman's gaping mouth, she knew exactly how coarse that curse was. Strangely embarrassing, that; it should not have counted for anything that Dyelin had been her mother's friend. Unthinking, she took a deep swallow of wine - and nearly gagged at the bitterness. Quickly she suppressed images of Lini threatening to wash out her mouth and reminded herself that she was a grown woman with a throne to win. She doubted her mother had ever found herself feeling foolish so often.

"Yes, he will, Birgitte," she went on, more calmly. "When he comes." Three couriers

were on their way to Tar Valon. Even if none managed to get past Elaida, Gawyn would learn eventually that she had made her claim, and he would come. She needed him desperately. She had no illusions of herself as a general, and Birgitte was so fearful she could not live up to the legends about her that sometimes she seemed afraid to try, Face an army, yes; lead an army, never under the sun!

Birgitte was well aware of the tangle in her own mind. Right that moment her face was frozen, but her emotions were full of self-anger and embarrassment, with the first growing stronger by the moment, With a stab of irritation, Elayne opened her mouth to pursue Dyelin's mention of civil war before she began reflecting Birgitte's anger.

Before she could utter a word, though, the tall red doors opened. Her hopes for Nynaeve or Vandene were dashed by the entrance of two Sea Folk women, barefoot despite the weather.

A cloud of musky perfume wafted ahead of them, and by themselves they made up a procession in bright brocaded silk trousers and blouses, jewelled daggers and necklaces of gold and ivory. And other jewellery. Straight black hair with white at the temples nearly hid the ten small, fat golden rings in Renaile din Calon's ears, but the arrogance in her dark eyes was as plain as the medallion-laden golden chain that connected one earring to her nose ring, Her face was set, and despite a graceful sway to her walk, she appeared ready to stride through a wall. Nearly a hand shorter than her companion and darker than charcoal, Zaida din Parede wore half again as many golden medallions dangling on her left cheek and carried an air of command rather than arrogance, a sure certainty that she would be obeyed. Gray flecked her cap of tight black curls, yet she was stunning, one of those women who grew more and more beautiful as they aged.

Dyelin flinched at sight of them, and half raised a hand to her nose before she

could stop herself. A common enough reaction in people unused to the Atha'an Miere.

Elayne grimaced, and not for their nose rings. She even considered another curse, something still more... pungent. Excepting the Forsaken, she could not have named two people she wanted less to see right then. Reene was supposed to see this did not happen!

"Forgive me," she said, rising smoothly, "but I am very busy, now, Matters of state, you understand, or I would greet you as your stations deserve." The Sea Folk were sticklers for ceremony and propriety, at least on their own terms. Very likely they had gotten past the First Maid by simply not telling her they wanted to see Elayne, but they easily might take offense if she greeted them sitting before the crown was hers. And, the Light burn both of them, she could not afford to offend. Birgitte appeared at her side, bowing formally to take her cup; the Warder bond carried wariness. She was always ginger around the Sea Folk; she had let her tongue slip around them, too, "I will see you later in the day," Elayne finished, adding, "The Light willing." They also were great ones for ceremonial turns of phrase, and that one showed courtesy and gave a way out.

Renaile did not stop until she stood right in front of Elayne, and much too close.

One tattooed hand gestured curt permission for her to sit, Permission! "You have been avoiding me." Her voice was deep for a woman, and as chill as the snow falling on the roof. "Remember that I am Windfinder to Nesta din Reas Two Moons, Mistress of the Ships to the Atha'an Miere. You still must fulfill the rest of the bargain you made for your White Tower." The Sea Folk knew of the division in the Tower - by this time, everyone and her sister knew - but Elayne had not seen fit to add to her difficulties by making public which side she was on. Not yet. Renaile finished on an imperious, commanding note. "You will deal with me, and now!" So much for ceremony

and propriety.

"She has been avoiding me, I think, not you, Windfinder." In contrast to Renaile, Zaida sounded as though she were merely making conversation. Rather than rushing across the carpets, she moved idly about the room, pausing to touch a tall vase of

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thin green porcelain, then rising on her toes to peer through a four-barreled kaleidoscope atop a tall stand. When she glanced toward Elayne and Renaile, an amused glint twinkled in her black eyes. "After all, the bargain was with Nests din Reas, speaking for the ships." In addition to Wavemistress of Clan Catelar, Zaida was an ambassador from the Mistress of the Ships. To Rand, not Andor, but her warrant gave the authority to speak and bind for Nesta herself. Changing one gold-chased barrel for another, she went on tiptoe to look through the eyepiece again, "You promised the Atha'an Miere twenty teachers, Elayne, So far, you have delivered one."

Their entrance had been so sudden, so dramatic, that Elayne was surprised to see Merilille turn from closing the doors. Shorter still than Zaida, the Gray sister was elegant in dark blue wool trimmed with silvery fur and sewn with small moonstones across the bodice, yet barely more than two weeks teaching the Windfinders had brought changes. Most were powerful women with a thirst for knowledge, more than ready to squeeze Merilille like a grape in the winepress, demanding the last drop of juice. Once, Elayne had thought her self-possessed beyond the ability to surprise, but now Merilille was constantly wide-eyed, her lips always a little parted, as though she had just been startled half out of her wits and expected to be startled again any moment. Folding her hands at her waist, she waited by the doorway, and appeared relieved to be out of the center of attention.

Harrumphing loudly, Dyelin got to her feet and scowled at Zaida and Renaile both.

"Have a care how you speak," she growled. 'You are in Andor, now, not on one of your ships, and Elayne Trakand will be Queen of Andor! Your bargain will be met in good time. For now, we have more important matters to contend with.'

"Under the Light, there are none more important," Renaile rumbled in turn, rounding on her. "You say the bargain will be met? So you stand surety. Know there will be room to dangle you by your ankles in the rigging as well if -"

Zaida snapped her fingers. That was all, but a tremor passed though Renaile, Snatching the golden scent-box dangling from one of her necklaces, she pressed it to her nose and breathed deeply. Windfinder to the Mistress of the Ships she might be, a woman of great authority and power among the Atha'an Miere, but to Zaida, she was... a Windfinder, Which grated her pride excessively, Elayne was sure there must be a way to use that to keep them out of her hair, but she had not found it, yet.

Oh, yes; for good or ill, Daes Dae'mar was in her bones, now.

She glided around a silently furious Renaile as if around a column, a part of the room, though not toward Zaida. If anyone had a right to be casual here, she did, She could not afford to give Zaida a hair of advantage, or the Wavemistress would shave her scalp for the wigmakers.

At the fireplace, she spread her hands in front of the flames again.

"Nesta din Reas trusted we would fulfill the bargain, or she never would have agreed to it," she said calmly. 'You have regained the Bowl of the Winds, but assembling nineteen more sisters to join you requires time. I know you worry about the ships that were at Ebou Dar when the Seanchan came. Have Renaile make a gateway to Tear. There are hundreds of Atha'an Miere vessels there.' Every report said so. 'You can learn what they know, and rejoin your people. They will have need of you, against

the Seanchan." And she would be rid of them, "The other sisters will be sent to you as soon as can be arranged." Merilille did not move from the doorway, but her face took on a green tinge of panic at the possibility of being alone among the Sea Folk. Zaida gave over looking through the kaleidoscope and eyed Elayne sideways. A smile quirked her very full lips, "I must remain here, at least until I speak with Rand al'Thor. If he ever comes." That smile tightened for an instant before blooming once more; Rand would have a hard time with her, "And I will keep Renaile and her companions, for the time. A handful of Windfinders more or less will make no great difference against these Seanchan, and here, the Light willing, they may learn what will be useful." Renaile snorted, just loudly enough to be heard, Zaida frowned briefly and began addling with the eyepiece that stood level with the top of her head. "There are five Aes Sedai here in your palace, counting yourself," she murmured thoughtfully. "Perhaps some of you might teach," As though the idea had just occurred to her. And if that were so, Elayne could lift both Sea Folk women with one hand!

"Oh, yes, that would be wonderful," Merilille burst out, taking a step forward. Then she glanced at Renaile and subsided, a blush suffusing her Cairhienin paleness. Folding her hands at her waist once more, she snatched meekness around herself like a second skin. Birgitte shook her head in amazement. Dyelin stared as if she had

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never seen the Aes Sedai before.

"Something may be worked out, if the Light pleases," Elayne said cautiously, Not rubbing at her temples took effort. She wished she could blame the ache inside her skull on the incessant thunder. Nynaeve would erupt at the suggestion, and Vandene likely would ignore any such order, but Careane and Sareitha might be possible. "For

no more than a few hours a day, you understand, When they have time." She avoided looking at Merilille. Even Careane and Sareitha might rebel at being tossed into that winepress.

Zaida touched the fingers of her right hand to her lips. "It is agreed, under the Light,"

Elayne blinked. That was ominous; in the Wavemistress's eyes, apparently, they had just made another bargain. Her limited experience of dealing with the Atha'an Miere was that you were lucky to walk away with your shift. Well, this time things were going to be different. For instance, what were the sisters to gain in it? There had to be two sides to a bargain, Zaida smiled, as if she knew what Elayne was thinking and was amused. One of the doors opening again was almost a relief, giving her an excuse to turn away from the Sea Folk woman.

Reene Harfor slipped into the room with deference but without servility, and her curtsy was restrained, suitable for the High Seat of a powerful House to her Queen. But then, any High Seat worth a pinch of salt knew enough to offer respect to the First Maid. Her graying hair was arranged in a bun, like a crown atop her head, and she wore a scarlet tabard over her red-and-white dress, with the White Lion of Andor's head resting on her formidable bosom. Reene had no say in who would sit on the throne, but she had adopted full formal dress on the day of Elayne's arrival, as if the Queen already were in residence. Her round face hardened momentarily at sight of the Atha'an Miere women who had bypassed her, but that was all the notice she gave them. For now. They would learn to their cost what incurring the animosity of the First Maid entailed.

"Mazrim Taim has come at last, my Lady." Reene managed to make that sound very like "my Queen." "Shall I tell him to wait."

Not beforetime! Elayne muttered in her head. She had summoned the man two days ago!

"Yes, Mistress Harfor. Give him wine, The third best, I think. Inform him that I will see him as soon as I -"

Taim strode into the room as though he owned the Palace. She did not need him named.

Blue-and-gold Dragons wove round the sleeves of his black coat from elbows to cuffs, in imitation of the Dragons on Rand's arms. Though she suspected he would not appreciate the observation. He was tall, nearly as tall as Rand, with a hooked nose and dark eyes like augurs, a physically powerful man who moved with something of a Warder's deadly grace, but shadows seemed to follow him, as if half the lamps in the room had gone out; not real shadows, but an air of imminent violence that seemed palpable enough to soak up light.

Two more black-coated men followed at his heels, a bald fellow with a long grizzled beard and leering blue eyes, and a younger man, snake-slim and dark-haired, with the sneering arrogance young men often adopted before they learned better. Both wore the silver Sword and red-enameled Dragon on their tall collars. None of the three wore a sword on his hip, though; they did not need swords, Suddenly the sitting room felt smaller, and crowded.

Instinctively, Elayne embraced saidar and reached out to link. Merilille slipped into the circle easily; astoundingly, so did Renaile. A quick glance at the Windfinder lessened her surprise, Her face gray, Renaile was gripping the dagger thrust behind her sash so hard that Elayne could feel the pain in her knuckles through the link, She had been in Caemlyn long enough to be aware of what an Asha'man was.

The men knew someone had embraced saidar, of course, even if they could not see the glow surrounding the three women. The bald man stiffened; the slim young man clenched his fists. They stared with angry eyes. Surely they had seized saidin.

Elayne began to regret giving in to reflex, but she was not going to let go of the Source, not now. Taim radiated danger the way a fire gave heat. She drew deeply through the link, to the point where the overwhelming sense of life became sharp, warning prickles. Even those felt ...joyous. With that much of the Power in her, she could lay waste to the Palace, but she wondered whether it was enough to match Taim and the other two, She very much wished she had one of the three angreal they had found in Ebou Dar, now safely locked away with the rest of the things from the cache until she had time to study them again.

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Taim shook his head contemptuously, a half-smile flickering across his lips. "Use your eyes." His voice was quiet, but hard and sneering. "There are two Aes Sedai here. Are you afraid of two Aes Sedai? Besides, you don't want to Frighten the Future Queen of Andor." His companions relaxed visibly, then began trying to emulate the unthinking dominance of his stance.

Reene knew nothing of saidar or saidin; she had rounded on the men, scowling, as soon as they entered, Asha'man or no Asha'man, she expected people to behave as they should. She muttered something almost under her breath. Not quite far enough under, though. The words "sneaking rats" were just audible.

The First Maid reddened when she realized everyone in the room had heard, and Elayne got a chance to see Reene Harfor flustered, Which was to say that the woman drew herself up and said, with a grace and dignity any ruler might envy, "Forgive me, my Lady Elayne, but I've been told there are rats infesting the storerooms. Most unusual this time of year, and so many of them. If you will excuse me, I must make sure my orders for ratcatchers and poison baits are being carried out."

"Stay," Elayne told her coolly. Calmly. "Vermin can be dealt with in due time." Two Aes Sedai. He did not realize Renaile could channel, and he had emphasized two. Would just three women give some advantage? Or did it take more? Plainly the Asha'man knew of some advantage to women in numbers less than a circle of thirteen. Walk in on her without so much as a by-your-leave, would they? "You can show these goodmen out when I'm done with them," Taim's companions scowled at being called "goodmen," but the man himself merely flashed another of those almost-smiles. He was quick enough to know she had been thinking of him when she spoke of vermin. Light! Maybe Rand had needed this man once, but why would he keep him now, and in a position of such authority? Well, his authority counted for nothing here. Unhurriedly, she took her chair again, and gave a moment to adjusting her skirts. The men would have to come around in front of her like supplicants, or else talk to the side of her head while she refused to look at them. For an instant she considered passing control of the small circle. The Asha'man would surely focus their attention on her. Renaile was still gray, though, anger and Fear tumbling over one another inside her; she might strike out as soon as the link was hers. Merilille had some fear, just under control, mixed with a very great deal of a... goosey... feeling that matched her wide eyes and parted lips; the Light alone knew what she might do with the link. Dyelin glided to the side of Elayne's chair, as if to shield her from the Asha'man. Whatever lay inside the High Seat of Taravin, her face was stern, unfrightened. The other women had wasted no time in preparing as best they could, Zaida stood very still beside the kaleidoscope, doing her best to look diminutive and harmless, but her hands were behind her back and the dagger was missing from behind her sash. Birgitte lounged beside the fireplace, left hand propped on the jamb, seemingly at her ease, but the sheath of her belt knife was empty, and from the way her other

hand rested by her side, she was ready for an underhand throw, The bond carried...

focus. Arrow nocked, drawn to cheek, ready to loose.

Elayne made no effort to look around Dyelin at the three men, "First you are too slow obeying my summons, Master Taim, and then too sudden," Light, was he holding saidin? There were methods of interfering with a man channeling short of shielding him, but it was a difficult skill, chancy, and she knew little more than the theory.

He did come in front of her, several paces off, but he did not look a supplicant.

Mazrim Taim knew who he was and his own worth, though he plainly set it higher than the sky. Lightning flashing in the windows sent strange lights across his face, Many would feel overawed by him, even without his fancy coat or his infamous name. She did not. She would not!

Taim rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I understand you've taken down the Dragon banners all over Caemlyn, Mistress

Elayne." There was amusement in his deep voice, if none in his eyes! Dyelin hissed in fury at the slight to Elayne, but he ignored her. "The Saldaeans have withdrawn to the Legion of the Dragon's camp, I hear, and soon the last of the Aiel will be in camps outside the city, as well. What will he say when he learns?" There was no doubt who he meant. "And after he's sent you a gift, too. From the south. I'll have it delivered later."

"I will ally Andor with the Dragon Reborn in due course," she told him coldly, "but Andor is not a conquered province, nor for him or anyone else." She made her hands stay relaxed on the arms of the chair. Light, talking the Aiel and Saldaeans into leaving had been her biggest achievement yet, and even with the flareup in crime, it

had been necessary! "In any case, Master Taim, it is not your place to call me to task. If Rand objects, I will deal with him!" Taim raised an eyebrow, and that odd quirk of his mouth lingered.

Burn me, she thought indignantly, I shouldn't have used Rand's name! The man clearly thought he knew exactly how she would deal with the anger of the bloody Dragon Reborn! The worst of it was, if she could trip Rand into a bed, she would. Not for this, not to deal with him, but because she wanted to, What sort of gift had he sent her?

Anger hardened her voice. Anger at Taim's tone at Rand for staying away so long. At herself, for blushing and thinking of gifts. Gifts. "You've walled in four miles of Andor." Light, that was more than half as large as the Inner City! How many of these fellows could it hold', The thought made her skin crawl. "With whose permission, Master Taim? Don't tell me the Dragon Reborn. He has no right to give permission for anything in Andor." Dyelin shifted beside her, No right, but enough strength could make right. Elayne kept her attention on Taim. 'You've refused the Queen's Guards entry to your... compound." Not that they had tried before she came home. "The law in Andor runs over all of Andor, Master Taim. Justice will be the same for lord or farmer - or Asha'man. I won't claim I can force my way in," He began to smile again, or nearly so, "I wouldn't demean myself. But unless the Queen's Guards are allowed in, I promise you not so much as a potato will go through your gates, either. I know you can Travel, Let your Asha'man spend their days Traveling to buy food," The almost smile vanished in a faint grimace; his boots shifted slightly.

Annoyance lasted only an instant, though. "Food is a small problem," he said smoothly, spreading his hands. "As you say, my men can Travel. To anywhere I command. I doubt you could stop me buying whatever I want even ten miles from Caemlyn, but it wouldn't bother me if you could, Still, I am willing to allow visits

whenever you ask. Controlled visits, with escorts at all times. The training is hard in the Black Tower. Men die almost every day. I would not want any accidents."

He was irritatingly accurate on how far from Caemlyn her writ ran. But no more than irritating. Were his remarks about Traveling anywhere he commanded and "accidents" meant to be veiled threats? Surely not. A wave of fury ran through her as she realized that she was certain he would not threaten her because of Rand. She would not hide behind Rand al'Thor. Controlled visits? When she asked? She ought to burn the man to a cinder where he stood!

Abruptly she became aware of what was coming through the bond from Birgitte, anger, a reflection of hers, joining with Birgitte's, reflecting from Birgitte to her, bouncing from her to Birgitte, feeding on itself, building. Birgitte's knife hand quivered with the desire to throw. And herself? Fury filled her! A whisker more, and she would lose saidar. Or lash out with it.

With an effort she forced rage down, into a semblance of calm. A rough, seething semblance. She swallowed, and struggled to keep her voice level, "The Guards will visit every day, Master Taim." And how she was to manage that in this weather, she did not know. "Perhaps I will come myself, with a few other sisters." If the thought of having Aes Sedai inside his Black Tower upset Taim, he did not show it. Light, she was trying to establish Andor's authority, not goad the man. Hurriedly she did a novice exercise - the river contained by the bank - seeking calm. It worked, a little. Now she merely wanted to throw all the winecups at him. "I will accede to your request for escorts, but nothing is to be hidden. I won't have crimes concealed by your secrets. Do we understand one another."

Taim's bow was mocking - mocking! - but there was a tightness in his voice. "I understand you perfectly. Understand me, though. My men are not farmers knuckling

their foreheads when you pass. Press an Asha'man too hard, and you may learn just how strong your law is."

Elayne opened her mouth to tell him exactly how strong the law was in Andor.

"It is time, Elayne Trakand," a woman's voice said from the doorway.

"Blood and ashes." Dyelin muttered. "Is the whole world just going to walk in here?"

Elayne recognized the new voice. She had been expecting this summons, without knowing when it would come. Knowing that it must be obeyed, though, on the instant, She stood, wishing she could have a little longer to make matters clear to Taim, He frowned at the woman who had just entered, and at Elayne, clearly uncertain what to make of this. Good. Let him stew until she had time to set him straight en what special rights Asha'man had in Andor.

Nadere stood as tall as either of the two men by the door, a wide woman, as close to stout as any Aiel Elayne had seen. Her green eyes examined the pair for a moment

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before dismissing them as unimportant. Asha'man did not impress Wise Ones. Very little did, Adjusting her dark shawl on her shoulders in a clatter of bracelets, she walked over in front of Elayne, her back to Taim. Despite the cold, she wore only that shawl over her thin white blouse, though oddly, she carried a heavy wool cloak draped across one arm. "You must come now," she told Elayne, "without delay." Taim's eyebrows seemed to be climbing his forehead; no doubt he was unaccustomed to being so thoroughly ignored.

"Light of heaven!" Dyelin breathed, massaging her forehead, "I don't know what this is about, Nadere, but it will have to wait until -"

Elayne laid a hand on her arm, "You don't know, Dyelin, and it can't wait. I will send everyone away and come with you, Nadere."

The Wise One shook her head disapprovingly. "A child waiting to be born cannot take time to send people away," She shook out the thick cloak. "I brought this to shield your skin from the cold, Perhaps I should leave it, and tell Aviendha your modesty is greater than your desire For a sister." Dyelin gasped in sudden realization, The Warder bond quivered with Birgitte's outrage.

There was only one choice possible. No choice, really, Letting the link to the other two women dissolve, she released saidar herself. The glow remained around Renaile and Merilille, though. "Will you help me with my buttons, Dyelin?" Elayne was proud of how steady her voice was. She had expected this. Just not with so many witnesses! she thought faintly. Turning her back on Taim - at least she would not have to see him watching her! - she began with the tiny buttons on her sleeves. "Dyelin, if you please? Dyelin?" After a moment Dyelin moved as if sleepwalking and began fumbling with the buttons down Elayne's back, muttering to herself in shocked tones. One of the Asha'man by the doors snickered.

"About turn!" Taim snapped, and boots stamped by the doors.

Elayne did not know whether he had turned away as well - she was certain she could feel his eyes on her - but suddenly Birgine was there, and Merilille and Reene, and Zaida, and even Renaile, crowding shoulder-to-shoulder, scowling as they formed a wall between her and the men. Not a very adequate wall. None were as tall as she, and neither Zaida nor Merilille stood higher than her shoulder,

Focus, she told herself. I am composed. I am tranquil. I am.... I'm stripping naked in a room full of people is what I am! She undressed as hurriedly as she could, letting her dress and shift fall to the floor, tossing her slippers and stockings on top of them. Her skin pebbled in the cool air; ignoring the chill just meant she was not shivering. And she rather thought the heat in her cheeks might have something to

do with that.

"Madness!" Dyelin muttered in a low voice, snatching up the clothes. "Utter madness!"

"What is this about?" Birgitte whispered. "Should I come with you?"

"I must go alone," Elayne whispered back. "Don't argue." Not that Birgitte gave any outward sign of it, but the bond carried volumes. Taking the golden hoops from her ears, she handed them to Birgitte, then hesitated before adding her Great Serpent ring. The Wise Ones had said she must come as a child came to birth. They had had a great many instructions, first among them to tell no one what was coming. For that matter, she wished she knew. A child came to birth without foreknowledge of what was to happen. Birgitte's muttering began to sound like Dyelin's.

Nadere came forward with the cloak, but simply held it out; Elayne had to take it and wrap it around herself hastily. She was still sure she could feel Taim's gaze.

Holding the heavy wool close, her instinct was to hurry from the room, but instead she drew herself up and turned around slowly. She would not scurry out cloaked in shame.

The men who had come with Taim stood rigidly, facing the doors, and Taim himself was peering at the fireplace, arms folded across his chest. The feel of his eyes had been imagination, then, Excepting Nadere, the other women looked at her in variations of curiosity, consternation and shock Nadere merely seemed impatient.

Elayne tried for her most queenly voice. "Mistress Harfor, you will offer Master Taim and his men wine, before they go," Well, at least it did not tremble, "Dyelin, please entertain the Wavemistress and the Windfinder, and see if you can allay their fears. Birgitte, I expect to hear your plan for recruiting tonight." The women she named blinked in startlement, nodded wordlessly,

Then she walked from the room, followed by Nadere, wishing she could have done

better, The last thing she heard before the door closed behind her was Zaida's voice. "Strange customs, you shorebound have."

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In the corridor she tried to move a little faster, though it was not easy while keeping the cloak from gaping, The red-and-white floor tiles were much colder than the carpets in the sitting room. A few servants, warmly bundled in good woolen livery, stared when they saw her, then hurried on about their tasks. The flames of the stand-lamps flickered; there were always drafts in the hallways. Occasionally the air stirred enough to make a wall hanging ripple lazily.

"That was on purpose, wasn't it." she said to Nadere, not really asking a question, "Whenever you called me, you'd have made sure there were plenty of people to watch. To make sure adopting Aviendha was important enough to me." It had to be more important than anything else, they had been told. "What did you do to her?" Aviendha seemed to have very little modesty sometimes, often walking around her apartments unclothed and unconcerned, not even noticing when servants entered. Making her undress in a crowd would have proved nothing.

"That is for her to tell you if she wishes," Nadere said complacently. "You are sharp to see it; many do not." Her large bosom heaved in a grunt that might have been a laugh. "Those men, turning their backs, and those women, guarding you. I would have put a stop to it if the man in the embroidered coat had not kept looking over his shoulder to admire your hips. And if your blushes had not said you knew." Elayne missed a step and stumbled, The cloak Bared, losing the little body warmth it had trapped before she could snatch it closed again. "That filthy pig-kisser!" she growled, "I'll...! I'll...!" Burn her, what could she do? Tell Rand? Let him deal

with Taim? Never in life!

Nadere eyed her quizzically, "Most men enjoy looking at a woman's bottom. Stop thinking about men, and start thinking about the woman you want for a sister."

Flushing again, Elayne put her mind on Aviendha, It did nothing to settle her nerves. There were specific things she had been told to think on before the ceremony, and some made her uneasy.

Nadere kept her pace to Elayne's, and Elayne took great care not to let her legs flash through the cloak's opening - there were servants everywhere - so it took them some little time to reach the room where the Wise Ones were gathered, more than a dozen of them in their bulky skirts and white blouses and dark shawls, decked with necklaces and bracelets of gold and silver, gems and ivory, their long hair held back with folded scarves. All the furnishings and carpets had been cleared out, leaving bare white floor tiles, and there was no fire on the hearth. Here, deep in the palace, with no windows, the crash of thunder was barely audible.

Elayne's eyes went straight to Aviendha, standing on the far side of the room.

Naked. She smiled at Elayne nervously, Nervously! Aviendha! Hurriedly throwing off the cloak, Elayne smiled back. Nervously, she realized. Aviendha gave a soft laugh, and after a moment, Elayne did, too. Light, the air was cold! And the floor was colder!

She did not know most of the Wise Ones in the room, but one face jumped at her, Amys' prematurely white hair combined with features that appeared short of their middle years to give her something of the look of an Aes Sedai, She must have Traveled from Cairhien. Egwene had been teaching the dreamwalkers, to repay their teaching about Tel'aran'rhiod. And to meet a debt, she claimed, though she had never made clear what debt.

"I hoped Melaine would be here," Elayne said, She liked Bael's wife, a warm and

generous woman. Not like two others in the room she recognized, bony Tamela with her angular face, and Viendre, a beautiful, blue-eyed eagle. Both were stronger in the Power than she, stronger than any sister she had met save Nynaeve. That was not supposed to matter among Aiel, but she could think of no other reason why they always sneered and looked down their noses when they saw her.

She expected Amys to take charge - Amys always did, it seemed - but it was a short woman named Monaelle, her hair yellow with hints of red, who stepped forward. Not truly short, yet still the only woman in the room shorter than Elayne. And the weakest in the Power, too, barely strong enough, had she gone to Tar Valon, to have earned the shawl. Perhaps that really did not count with Aiel.

"Were Melaine here," Monaelle said, her tone brisk but not unfriendly, "the babes she carries would be part of the bond between you and Aviendha, if the weaves brushed them. If they survived, that is; the unborn are not strong enough for this. The question is, are the two of you?" She gestured with both hands, pointing to spots on the floor not far from her. "Come here to the middle of the chamber, both of you."

For the first time, Elayne realized that saidar was to be part of this. She had

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thought it would be just a ceremony, pledges exchanged, perhaps oaths given. What was going to happen? It did not matter, except.... Her steps dragged as she moved toward Monaelle, "My Warder.... Our bond.... Will she be... affected... by this."

Aviendha, coming to face her, had frowned when Elayne hesitated, but at the question, she swung startled eyes to Monaelle. Clearly, it was something she had not thought of.

The short Wise One shook her head, "No one outside this chamber can be touched by the weaves. She may sense some part of what you share with each other, because of her bond with you, but only a very little." Aviendha heaved a sigh of relief that Elayne echoed.

"Now," Monaelle went on, "There are forms to be followed. Come. We are not clan chiefs discussing water-pledges over oosquai." Laughing, making what seemed to be jokes about clan chiefs and the strong Aiel liquor, the other women formed a circle around Aviendha and Elayne. Monaelle settled gracefully to the floor, sitting cross-legged two paces to one side of the bare women. Laughter ceased as her voice became formal. "We are gathered because two women wish to be first-sisters. We will see whether they are strong enough, and if they are, help them. Are their mothers present?"

Elayne gave a start, but the next moment Viendre was behind her. "I stand for Elayne Trakand's mother, who cannot be here," Hands on Elayne's shoulders, Viendre pushed her forward and pressed down until she was kneeling on the cold tiles in front of Aviendha, then knelt behind her. "I offer my daughter to her testing."

Tamela appeared behind Aviendha, pressing her down with her knees almost touching Elayne's, kneeling at her back. "I stand for Aviendha's mother, who cannot be here, I offer my daughter to her testing."

Another time, Elayne might have giggled. Neither woman looked more than a half-dozen years older than Aviendha or her. Another time. Not now. The standing Wise Ones wore solemn faces. They were studying her and Aviendha as if weighing them, unsure they would measure up,

"Who will suffer the pangs of birth for them?" Monaelle asked, and Amys stepped forward.

Two others came with her, a fiery redhead named Shyanda, whom Elayne had seen with

Melaine, and a graying woman she did not know. They helped Amys strip to her skin.

Proud in her nakedness, Amys faced Monaëlle and slapped her nut belly, "I have borne children, I have given suck," she said, cupping breasts that looked as if she had done nothing of the kind. "I offer myself."

At Monaëlle's dignified nod of acceptance, Amys went to her knees two paces on the other side of Elayne and Aviendha and settled back on her heels, Shyanda and the graying Wise One knelt flanking her, and suddenly the glow of the Power surrounded every woman in the room except Elayne, Aviendha and Amys.

Elayne took a deep breath, and saw Aviendha do the same, Occasionally a bracelet clicked against another among the Wise Ones, the only sound in the room beyond breathing, and faint, distant thunder. It was almost a shock when Monaëlle spoke.

"You will both do as you are instructed. If you waver or question, your dedication is not strong enough. I will send you away, and that will be the end of it, forever.

I will ask questions, and you will answer truthfully. If you refuse to answer, you will be sent away. If any here think you lie, you will be sent away. You may leave at any time on your own, of course, Which also will end this for all time, There are no second chances here. Now, What is the best you know of the woman you want for a first-sister?"

Elayne half-expected the question. This was one of the things she had been told to think about. Choosing one virtue among many had not been easy, yet she had her answer ready. When she spoke, flows of saidar suddenly wove together between her and Aviendha, and no sound came from her tongue, or Aviendha's. Without thought, a part of her mind tucked away the weaves; even now, trying to learn was as much a part of her as the color of her eyes, The weaves vanished as her lips closed.

"Aviendha is so confident, so proud. She doesn't care what anyone thinks she should

do, or be; she is who she wants to be," Elayne heard her own voice say, while Aviendha's words suddenly were audible at the same time, "Even when Elaine is so afraid that her mouth dries, her spirit will not bend. She is braver than anyone I have ever known,"

Elayne stared at her fiend. Aviendha thought she was brave? Light, she was no coward, but brave? Strangely, Aviendha was staring at her in disbelief.

"Courage is a well," Viendre said at Elayne's ear, "deep in some, shallow in others.

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Deep or shallow, wells go dry eventually, even if they fill again later. You will face what you cannot face. Your spine will turn to jelly, and your vaunted courage will leave you weeping in the dust, The day will come." She sounded as though she wanted to be there to see it come, Elaine gave a curt nod. She knew all about her spine turning to jelly; she fought it every day, it seemed.

Tamela was speaking to Aviendha, in a voice almost as satisfied as Viendre's, "Ji'e'toh binds you like bands of steel, For ji, you make yourself exactly what is expected of you, to the last hair. For toh, if necessary you will abase yourself and crawl on your belly. Because you care to your bones what everyone thinks of you," Elayne nearly gasped, That was harsh, and unfair. She knew something of ji'e'toh, but Aviendha was not like that, Yet Aviendha was nodding, much as she herself had. An impatient acceptance of what she already knew.

"Fine traits to love in a first-sister," Monaelle said, liking her shawl down to her elbows, "but what do you And worst in her?"

Elayne shifted on her chilling knees, licked her lips before speaking. She had dreaded this. It was not just Monaelle's warning. Aviendha had said they must speak the truth, Must, or what was sisterhood worth? Again the weaves held their words

captive until they were done.

"Aviendha...", Elayne's voice said suddenly, hesitantly. "She... she thinks violence is always the answer. At times, she won't think beyond her belt knife. At times, she's like a boy who won't grow up!"

"Elayne knows that..." Aviendha's voice began, then gulped and went on in a rush.

"She knows she is beautiful, knows the power it gives her over men, She exposes half her bosom sometimes, in the open air, and she smiles to make men do what she wants."

Elayne gaped. Aviendha thought that of her? It made her sound a lightskirt! Aviendha frowned back and half-opened her mouth, but Tamela pressed her shoulders again and began to speak.

'You think men do not stare at your face in approval.'

There was an edge in the Wise One's voice; strong was the best anyone would ever say of her face, "Do they not look at your breasts in the sweat tent? Admire your hips?

You are beautiful, and you know it. Deny it, and deny yourself! You have taken pleasure in men's looks, and smiled at them. Will you never smile at a man to give your arguments more weight, or touch his arm to distract him from the weakness of your arguments. You will, and you will be no less for it."

Red flooded Aviendha's cheeks, but Elayne was having to listen to Viendre, And fight blushes of her own. "There is violence in you. Deny it, and deny yourself. Have you never raged and struck out? Have you never drawn blood? Have you never wished to? Without considering another way? Without any thought at all,' While you breathe, that will be part of you." Elayne thought of Taim, and other times, and her face felt like a furnace,

This time, there was more than one response.

'Your arms will grow weak,' Tamela was telling Aviendha. 'Your legs will lose their

swiftness, A youth will be able to take the knife from your hand. How will skill or ferocity avail you then', Heart and mind are the true weapons, But did you learn to use the spear in a day, when you were a Maiden? If you do not hone mind and heart now, you will grow old and children will befuddle your wits. Clan chiefs will sit you in a corner to play cat's cradle, and when you speak, all will hear only the wind. Take heed while you can."

"Beauty flees," Viendre went on, to Elayne. "Years will make your breasts sag, your flesh grow slack, your skin grow leathery. Men who smiled to see your face will speak to you as if you were just another man. Your husband may see you always as the first time his eyes caught you, but no other man will dream of you. Will you no longer be you? Your body is only clothing. Your flesh will wither, but you are your heart and mind, and they do not change except to grow stronger, Elayne shook her head. Not in denial. Not really. She had never thought on aging, though, Especially not since going to the Tower. The years lay lightly even on very old Aes Sedai. But what if she lived as long as the Kinswomen? That would mean giving up being Aes Sedai, of course, but what if she did? The Kin took a very long time to grow wrinkles, but grow them they did. What was Aviendha thinking? She knelt there looking... sullen.

"What is the most childish thing you know of the woman you want for a first-sister?" Monaelle said.

This was easier, not so fraught. Elayne even smiled as she spoke. Aviendha grinned back, sullenness gone. Again the weaves took their words and released them together,

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voices with laughter in them.

"Aviendha won't let me teach her to swim. I've tried, She isn't afraid of anything,

except getting into more water than a bathtub."

"Elayne gobbles sweets with both hands like a child who's escaped her mother's eye.

If she keeps on, she will be fat as a pig before she grows old."

Elayne jerked. Gobbles? Gobbles? A taste, now and then, was all she took Just now and then, Fat? Why was Aviendha glaring at her.' Refusing to step into water more than knee-deep was childish.

Monaelle covered a slight cough with one hand, but Elayne thought she was hiding a smile. Some of the standing Wise Ones laughed outright. At Aviendha's silliness? Or her... gobbling?

Monaelle resumed dignity, adjusting her skirts spread out of the floor, but there was still a touch of mirth in her voice. "What is your greatest jealousy of the woman you want for a first-sister'," "

Perhaps Elayne would have hedged her answer despite the requirement for truth. Truth had jumped up as soon as she was told to think on this, but she had found something smaller, less embarrassing for them both, that would have passed muster. Perhaps. But there was that about her smiling at men and exposing her bosom. Maybe she did smile, but Aviendha walked in front of red-faced serving-men without a stitch on and seemed not even to see them! So she gobbled candy, did she? She was going to get fat? She spoke the bitter truth while the weaves took her words and Aviendha's mouth moved in grim silence, until at last, what they had said was loosed.

"Aviendha has lain in the arms of the man I love. I never have; I may never, and I could weep over it!"

"Elayne has the love of Rand al'Th... of Rand. My heart is dust for wanting him to love me, but I do not know if he ever will."

Elayne peered into Aviendha's unreadable face, She was jealous of her over Rand?

When the man avoided Elayne Trakand as if she had scabies', She had no time for more thought.

"Strike her as hard as you can with your open hand," Tamela told Aviendha, removing her own hands from Aviendha's shoulders.

Viendre squeezed Elayne's lightly, "Do not defend yourself." They had not been told anything of this! Surely, Aviendha would not -

Blinking, Elayne pushed herself up from the icy floor tiles, Gingerly she felt her cheek, and winced. She was going to wear a palm print the rest of the day. The woman did not have to hit her that hard.

Everyone waited until she was kneeling again, and then Viendre leaned closer,

"Strike her as hard as you can with your open hand."

Well, she was not going to knock Aviendha on her ear. She was not going to - Her full-armed slap sent Aviendha sprawling, sliding on her chest across the tiles almost to Monaëlle. Elayne's palm stung almost as much as her cheek.

Aviendha half pushed herself up, gave her head a shake, then scrambled back to her position. And Tamela said, "Strike her with the other hand."

This time, Elayne slid all the way to Amys' knees on the frozen tiles, her head ringing, both cheeks burning. And when she regained her own knees in front of Aviendha, when Viendre told her to strike, she put her whole body into the slap, so much that she nearly fell over atop Aviendha as the other woman went down.

'You may go now,' Monaëlle said,

Elayne's eyes jerked toward the Wise One. Aviendha, halfway back to her knees, went stiff as stone.

"If you wish to," Monaëlle continued. "Men usually do, at this point if not sooner.

Many women do, too. But if you still love one another enough to go on, then embrace."

Elayne flung herself at Aviendha, and was met with a rush that nearly knocked her over backwards. They clung together, Elayne felt tears trickling from her eyes, and realized Aviendha was crying as well. "I'm sorry," Elayne whispered fervently, "I'm sorry, Aviendha."

"Forgive me," Aviendha whispered back "Forgive me."

Monaelle was standing over them, now. "You will know anger at one another again, you will speak harsh words, but you will always remember that you have already struck her. And for no better reason than you were told to. Let those blows pass for all you might wish to give, You have *toh* toward one another, *toh* you cannot repay and will not try to, for every woman is always in her first-sister's debt. You will be born again,"

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The feel of *saidar* in the room was changing, but Elayne had no chance to see how even had she thought of it. The light dwindled as if the lamps were being put out, The feel of Aviendha's hug dwindled. Sound dwindled. The last thing she heard was Monaelle's voice. 'You will be born again.' Everything faded. She faded. She ceased to exist.

Awareness, of a sort. She did not think of herself as she, she did not think at all, but she was aware. Of sound. A liquid swishing all around. Muted gurgles and rumbles, And a rhythmic thudding. That above all. *Thu-thud. Thu-thud.* She did not know contentment, but she was content. *The-thuh.*

Time. She did not know time, yet Ages passed. There was a sound within her, a sound that was her. *Thu-thuh.* The same sound, the same rhythm as the other. *Thu-thud, And* from another place, nearer. *Thu-thud. Another. Thu-thud.* The same sound, the same

beat, as her own. Not another. They were the same; they were one, Thu-thud.

Forever went by to that pulse, all the time that had ever been. She touched the other that was herself. She could feel, Thu-thud. She moved, she and the other that was herself, writhing against one another, limbs entangling, rolling away but always coming back to each other. Thu-thud. There was light sometimes, in the darkness; dim beyond seeing, but bright in one who had never known anything but darkness. Thu-thud. She opened her eyes, stared into the eyes of the other that was herself, and closed hers again, content. Thu-thud.

Change, sudden, shocking to one who had never known any change. Pressure, Thu-thud-thu-thud. That comforting beat was faster. Convulsive pressure. Again. Again, Getting stronger. Thu-thud-thu-thud! Thu-thud-thu-thud!

Suddenly, the other that was herself - was gone. She was alone, She did not know fear, but she was afraid, and alone, Thu-thud-thu-thud! Pressure! Greater than anything before! Squeezing her, crushing her. If she had known how to scream, if she had known what a scream was, she would have shrieked.

And then light, blinding, full of swirling patterns, She had weight; she had never felt weight before. A cutting pain at her middle. Something tickled her foot.

Something tickled her back. At first she did not realize that wailing sound was coming from her. She kicked feebly, waved limbs that did not know how to move. She was lifted, laid on something soft but firmer than anything she had felt before, except for recollections of the other that was herself, the other that was gone.

Thu-thud, Thu-thud. The sound. The same sound, the same beat. Loneliness reigned, unrecognized, but there was contentment, too.

Memory began to return, slowly. She lifted her head from a breast and looked up into Amys' face. Yes, Amys. Sweat-slick and weary-eyed, but smiling. And she was Elayne; yes, Elayne Trakand. But there was something more to her, now. Not like the Warder

bond, but like it in a way. Fainter, but more magnificent. Slowly, on a neck that wobbled uncertainly, she turned her head to look at the other that was herself, lying on Amys' other breast. To look at Aviendha, her hair maned, her face and body shining with sweat. Smiling with joy. Laughing, weeping, they clutched each other and hung on as if they never intended to let go.

"This is my daughter Aviendha," Amys said, "and this is my daughter Elayne, born on the same day, within the same hour. May they always guard one another, support one another, love one another." She laughed softly, tiredly, fondly, "And now will someone bring us garments before my new daughters and I all freeze to death?"

Elayne did not care at that moment if she did freeze to death, She clung to Aviendha in laughter and tears, She had found her sister. Light, she had found her sister!

Toveine Gazal woke to the sounds of quiet bustle, other women moving about, some talking softly. Lying on her hard narrow cot, she sighed with regret. Her hands around Elaida's throat had been just a pleasant dream. This tiny canvas-walled room was reality. She had slept poorly, and she felt thinned, drained, She had overslept, too; there would be no time for breakfast. Reluctantly she tossed off her blankets, The building had been a small warehouse of some sort, with thick walls and heavy rafters low overhead, but there was no heat, Her breath misted, and the crisp morning air pricked through her shift before her feet reached the rough floorboards. Even if she could have considered lying abed in this place, she had her orders. Logain's filthy bond made disobedience impossible, no matter how often she wished it.

She always tried to think of him as simply Ablar, or at worst Master Ablar, but it was always just Logain that came into her mind. The name he had made infamous. Logain, the False Dragon who had shattered the armies of his native Ghealdan.

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Logain, who had carved a path through the few Altarans and Murandians with nerve enough to try stopping him until he threatened Lugard itself. Logain, who had been gentled and somehow could channel again, who had dared to fix his cursed weave of saidin on Toveine Gazal. A pity for him he had not commanded her to stop thinking! She could feel the man, in the back of her head. He was always there.

For a moment, she squeezed her eyes shut. Light! Mistress Doweel's farm had seemed the Pit of Doom, years of exile and penance with no way out except the unthinkable, to become a hunted renegade, Barely half a week since her capture, she knew better. This was the Pit of Doom. And there was no escape. Angrily, she shook her head, and scrubbed glistening dampness from her cheeks with her fingers. No! She would escape, somehow, if only for long enough to put her real hands on Elaida's throat, Somehow.

Aside from the cot, there were only three pieces of furniture, yet they left little space for her to move. She cracked the ice in the yellow-striped pitcher on the washstand with her belt knife, filled the chipped white basin, and channeled to heat the water till tendrils of steam rose. It was allowed to channel for that, That and no more, By rote she washed and scrubbed her teeth with salt and soda, then took a fresh shift and stockings from the small wooden chest at the foot of the cot. Her ring she left in the chest, tucked under everything else in a small velvet pouch.

Another order. All of her things were here, except for her lapdesk. Luckily, that had been lost when she was taken, Her dresses hung on a cloakstand, the last of the room's furnishings, Choosing one without really looking, she put it on mechanically and used comb and brush on her hair.

The ivory-backed brush slowed as she really saw herself in the washstand's cheap, bubbled mirror, Breathing raggedly, she set the brush down beside the matching comb,

The dress she had chosen was thick, finely woven wool of an unadorned red so dark it seemed nearly black. Black, like an Asha'man's coat. Her distorted image stared back at her, lips writhing. Changing would be a sort of surrender. Determinedly she snatched her marten-lined gray cloak from the stand.

When she pushed aside the canvas doorflap, twenty or so sisters already occupied the long central hallway lined with canvas rooms. Here and there a few were speaking in murmurs, but the rest avoided each other's eyes, even when they belonged to the same Ajah. Fear had its presence, but it was shame that coated most faces, Akoure, a stout Gray, was staring at the hand where she normally wore her ring. Desandre, a willowy Yellow, was hiding her right hand in her armpit.

The soft conversations trailed off when Toveine appeared. Several women glared at her openly. Including Jenare and Lemai, from her own Ajah! Desandre came to herself enough to turn her back stiffly. In the space of two days, fifty-one Aes Sedai had fallen captive to the black-coated monsters, and fifty of them blamed Toveine Gazal as though Elaida a'Roihan had no hand in the disaster at all, Except for Logain's intervention, they would have had their revenge their first night here, She did not love him for putting a stop to it and making Carniele Heal the welts left by belts, the bruises left by fists and feet. She would rather they had beaten her to death than owe him,

Putting her cloak on her shoulders, she walked proudly down the corridor, out into pale morning sunshine that suited her washed-out mood. Behind her, someone shouted acid words before the closing door cut them off. Her hands trembled as she pulled up her hood, nestling the dark fur around her face. No one got away with pushing down Toveine Goal. Even Mistress Doweel, who had crushed her into a semblance of submission over the years, learned that when her exile ended, She would show them,

She would show them all!

The dormitory she shared with the others lay on the very edge of a large village, if a very strange one, A village of Asha'man. Elsewhere, so she had been told, ground was marked off for structures they claimed would dwarf the White Tower, but this was where most of them lived now. Five large, blocky stone barracks, spaced along streets as wide as anything in Tar Valon, could each hold a hundred Asha'man Soldiers. They were not full yet, the Light be thanked, but snow-covered scaffolding awaited the arrival of workmen around the thick walls of two more that were almost ready for roofing in thatch. Nearly a dozen smaller stone structures were made to hold ten Dedicated each, and another of those was under construction, too. Scattered around them stood nearly two hundred houses that might have been seen in any village, where some of the married men lived, and the families of others not far enough along in training.

Men who could channel did not frighten her. Once she had given in to panic for a moment, true, but that was beside the point. Five hundred men who could channel,

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however, were a scrap of bone wedged between two of her teeth where she could not free it, Five hundred! And they could Travel, some of them, A sharp scrap of bone. More, she had tramped the mile or more through the woods to the wall, That frightened her, what it signified.

Nowhere was the wall finished, nowhere more than twelve or Fifteen feet high, none of the towers or bastions more than begun. In places, she could have clambered over the piles of black stone, except for her orders not to attempt escape, The thing ran for eight miles, though, and she believed Logain when he said it was begun less than three months ago, The man held her too tightly to bother with lying. He called the

wall a waste of time and effort, and perhaps it was, but it made her teeth chatter.

Just three months. Made using the Power. The male half of the Power. When she thought of that black wall, she saw an implacable force that could not be stopped, an avalanche of black stone sliding down to bury the White Tower. Impossible, of course. Impossible, but when she did not dream of strangling Elaida, she dreamed of that.

There had been snowfall in the night, and a heavy blanket of white covered every roof, but she did not have to pick her way along the broad streets. The hard-packed dirt had been cleared, a chore of men in training before the sun came up. They used the Power for everything from filling woodboxes to cleaning their clothes!

Black-clad men hurried here and there in the streets, and more were gathering in rows in front of their barracks with others calling roll in loud voices. Women bundled up against the cold walked past them, placidly carrying baskets to the quartermaster's storehouse or water buckets to the nearest fountain, though how any woman could remain, knowing what her husband was, was beyond Toveine's comprehension. Even more bizarre, children ran up and down the street, around the squares of men who could channel, shouting and laughing, rolling hoops, tossing painted balls, playing with dolls or dogs. A drop of normality that heightened the evil stench of the rest,

Ahead of her, a mounted party was approaching up the street at a walk. In the short time she had been here - the endless time - she had not seen anyone ride in the village except workmen on carts or wagons. Nor any visitors, which some of these plainly must be. Five men in black were escorting a dozen in the red coats and cloaks of the Queen's Guard, with two yellow-haired women at the front, one in a red-and-white cloak lined with black fur and the other.... Toveine's eyebrows

climbed. The other wore green Kandori trousers and a coat made up as if it belonged to the Captain-General of the Guard. Her red cloak even had golden knots of rank on the shoulder! Maybe she was mistaken about the men, That one would find short shift when she encountered real Guardsmen. In any case, it was strangely early for visitors,

Each time the odd party reached one of the formations, the man in front shouted "Asha'man, attend front." and boot heels stamped on the hardened earth as the others stiffened like pillars of stone.

Pulling her hood forward better to hide her face, Toveine moved to the side of the wide street, close beside the corner of one of the smaller stone barracks. A fork-bearded old man coming out, a silver sword pin on his high collar, glanced at her curiously without slowing his stride.

What she had done struck her like a bucket of cold water, and she nearly wept. None of those strangers would spot an Aes Sedai face, now, if they could recognize one. If either of those women could channel, unlikely though that was, she would not pass close enough to tell that Toveine could, too. She fretted and fumed over how to disobey Logain, and then did everything necessary to carry out his instructions without even thinking about it!

As an act of defiance, she stopped where she was, turning to watch the visitors, Automatically, her hands checked her hood before she could snatch them to her sides. It was pitiful, and ridiculous. She knew the Asha'man guiding the party, by sight at least, a bulky man in his middle years with oily black hair, an oily smile, and eyes like augurs. None of the others, though. What could she hope to gain by this', How could she entrust a message to any of them? Even if the escort vanished, how could she get close enough to pass a message when she was forbidden to let any outsider discover the presence of Aes Sedai?

The augur-eyed fellow looked bored with his duty this morning, hardly bothering to hide his yawns behind a gloved hand. "...when we do finish here," he was saying as he rode past Toveine. "I will show you the Craft Town. Quite a bit bigger than this. We do have every kind. of craftsfolk, from masons and carpenters to metalsmiths and

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tailors. We can make everything we need, Lady Elayne."

"Except turnips," one of the women said in a high voice, and the other laughed.

Toveine's head jerked. She watched the riders move on down the street accompanied by shouted orders and stamping boots, Lady Elayne? Elayne Trakand? The younger of the pair might match the description she had been given. Elaida did not reveal why she was so desperate to lay her hands on one runaway Accepted, even one who might become a queen, but she never let a sister leave the Tower without orders on what to do if she encountered the girl. Be very careful, Elayne Trakand, Toveine thought. I would not like Elaida to have the satisfaction of laying hands on you.

She wanted to think on this, on whether there was some way to use the girl's presence here, but abruptly she became aware of the sensations at the back of her head. A mild contentment and a growing purpose. Logain had finished. his breakfast. He would be coming out, soon, He had told her to be there when he did.

Her feet were running before she thought. With the result that her skirts tangled in her legs, and she fell hard, knocking her breath out. Anger welled up, fury, but she scrambled to her feet and, without pausing to brush off the dust, gathered her skirts above her knees and began to run again, cloak billowing behind. Men's raucous shouts followed her down the street, and laughing children pointed as she ran past. Suddenly a pack of dogs was around her, snarling, nipping at her heels. She leapt

and spun and kicked, but they harried her. She wanted to shriek with frustration and fury. Dogs were always a bother, and she could not channel a feather to drive them off. A gray hound seized a mouth-ful of dangling skirt, pulling her sideways, Panic overwhelmed everything else. If she fell again, they would tear her to shreds.

A shouting woman in brown wool swung her heavy basket at the dog tugging Toveine's skirt, making it dodge away. A round woman's bucket caught a brindled cur in the ribs, and it ran yelping. Toveine gaped in astonishment, and for her inattention had to pull her left leg away from another dog at the cost of a piece of her sacking and a little skin. There were women all around her, flailing away at the animals with whatever they had to hand.

"Go on with you, Aes Sedai," a skinny, graying woman told her, slicing at a spotted dog with a switch, "They won't bother you more. I'd like a nice cat, myself, but cats won't abide the husband now, Go on."

Toveine did not wait to thank her rescuers, She ran, considering furiously. The women knew. If one did, they all did. But they would carry no messages, give no help to an escape, not when they were willing to remain themselves, Not if they understood what they were helping, There was that,

Just short of Logain's house, one of several down a narrower side street, she slowed and hastily let down her skirts. Eight or nine men in black coats were waiting outside, boys and oldsters and in between, but there was no sign of Logain yet. She could still sense him, full of purpose but concentrating. Reading, perhaps. She walked the rest of the way at a dignified pace, Composed and every inch an Aes Sedai, no matter the circumstances. She almost managed to forget her frantic flight from the dogs.

The house surprised her every time she saw it, Others on the street were as large and two larger, An ordinary wooden house of two stories, though the red door,

shutters and window frames looked odd, Plain curtains hid the interior, but the glass in the windows was so poor she doubted she could have seen anything clearly with the curtains drawn. A house suitable for a not overly successful shopkeeper; hardly the dwelling for one of the most notorious men alive.

Briefly she wondered what was keeping Gabrelle. The other sister bonded to Logain had the same instruction she did, and until now, she had always been here first.

Gabrelle was eager, studying the Asha'man as if she intended writing a book on the subject. Perhaps she did; Browns would write about anything. She put the other sister out of her mind. Although, if Gabrelle did turn up late, she would have to find out how the woman had managed it, For now, she had her own studying.

The men outside the red door eyed her, but said nothing, even to each other. Still there was no animosity. They were simply waiting. None had a cloak, though their breath made pale feathers in front of their faces. All were Dedicated, with the silver sword. pin on their collars.

It had been the same every morning she had reported this way, though not always the same men. She knew some, knew their names at least, and sometimes a few other gleaned tidbits, Evin Vinchova, the pretty lad who had been there when Logain captured her, leaning against the corner of the house and toying with a bit of string. Donalo Sandomere, if that was his real name, with his creased farmer's face

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and sharply trimmed oiled beard, attempting the languid stance he thought a nobleman would assume, The Taraboner Androl Genhald, a square fellow with his heavy eyebrows drawn in thought and his hands clasped behind his back; he wore a gold signet ring, but she thought him an apprentice who had shaved his mustaches and abandoned his

veil. Mezar Kurin, a Domani with gray at his temples, fingering the garnet in his left ear; he very well might be a minor noble. She was collecting a neat file of names and faces in her head. Sooner or later they would be hunted down, and every piece of information that could help identify them would be useful.

The red door opened, and the men straightened, but it was not Logan who came out. Toveine blinked in surprise, then met Gabrelle's sooty green eyes with a flat stare, making no effort to hide her disgust. That accursed link with Logain had made clear what he was up to the night before - she had been afraid she would never fall asleep! - but not in her darkest imaginings had she suspected Gabrelle! Some of the men seemed as startled as she. Some attempted to hide smiles, Kurin grinned openly and stroked his thin mustache with a thumb.

The dusky woman did not even have the grace to blush. She liked her upturned nose a trifle, then boldly adjusted her dark blue dress over her hips as if to advertise that she had just donned the garment. Sweeping her cloak around her shoulders, she tied the ribbons as she glided toward Toveine, as serene as if she were back in the Tower.

Toveine grabbed the taller woman's arm, pulling her a little way from the men. "We may be captives, Gabrelle," she whispered harshly, "but that is no reason to surrender. Especially to Ablar's vile lusts!" The other woman did not so much as look abashed! A thought came, Of course. "Did he... ? Did he order you?"

With something close to a sneer, Gabrelle pulled free. "Toveine, it took me two days to decide I should 'surrender' to his lusts, as you put it. I feel lucky it only required four to convince him to let me. You Reds might not be aware, but men love to talk and gossip, All you need do is listen, or even pretend to, and a man will tell you his whole life." A thoughtful frown creased her forehead, and the twist to her lips vanished, "I wonder whether it's like that for ordinary women.

"Whether what is like what." Toveine demanded. Gabrelle was spying on him? Or just trying to get more material for her book? But this was unbelievable, even for a Brown! "What are you talking about?"

That musing expression never left the other's face. "I felt ...helpless, Oh, he was gentle, but I never really thought before on how strong a man's arms are, and me unable to channel a whisker, He was... in charge, I suppose, though that isn't quite right. Just... stronger, and I knew it, It Felt ...strangely exhilarating."

Toveine shuddered. Gabrelle must be insane! She was about to tell her so when Logain himself appeared, closing the door behind him. He was tall, taller than any other man there, with dark hair that brushed wide shoulders and framed an arrogant face. His high collar carried both the silver sword and that ridiculous snake with legs. He flashed a smile at Gabrelle as the others gathered around him, The hussy smiled back, too. Toveine shuddered again. Exhilarating, The woman was insane!

As on previous mornings, the men began making reports, Most of the time, Toveine had not been able to make up from down with them, but she listened,

"I found two more who seem interested in that new kind of Healing this Nynaeve used on you, Logain," Genhald said, frowning, "but one can barely do the Healing we already know, and the other, he wants to know more than I could tell him."

"What you can tell him is all I know," Logain replied. "Mistress al'Meara didn't tell me much of what she was doing, and I could only learn bits and pieces listening to the other sisters talk. Just keep planting the seed and hope something grows, It's all you can do." Several other men nodded along with Genhald.

Toveine filed it away, Nynaeve al'Meara. She had heard that name often after returning to the Tower. Another runaway Accepted, another one Elaida wanted more than the normal desire to catch runaways seemed to account for, From the same

village as al"Thor, too. And associated somehow with Logain. That might lead to something, eventually. But a new kind of Healing? Used by an Accepted? That was unlikely bordering close on impossible, but she had seen the impossible happen before, so she tucked it away. Gabrelle was listening closely, too, she noticed. But watching her as well, out of the corner of her eye,

"There's a problem with some of those Two Rivers men, Logain," Vinchova said. An angry flush rose on his smooth face. "Men, I say, but these two are boys, fourteen at most!

They won't say." He might have been a year or two older, with his beardless cheeks.

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"It was a crime, bringing them here,"

Logain shook his head; whether it was in anger or regret was hard to say. "I've heard the White Tower takes girls as young as twelve. Look after the Two Rivers men where you can. No coddling, or the others will turn on them, but try to see they don't do anything stupid, The Lord Dragon might not like it if we kill too many from his district."

"He doesn't seem to be caring much at all as I can see," a sleek fellow muttered.

The sound of Murandy was strong in his mouth, though his fiercely curled mustaches told where he was from plainly enough. He was rolling a silver coin across the backs of his fingers and seemed as intent on that as on Logain. "I was hearing it was the Lord Dragon himself told the M'Hael m pluck up anything male in this Two Rivers that could channel, down to the roosters. With the number he brought back, I'm just surprised he didn't bring the chicks and lambs, as well," Chuckles met his sally, but Logain's level tones cut them like a blade,

"Whatever the Lord Dragon ordered, I trust I've made my orders clear," Every head

nodded this time, and some men murmured "Yes, Logain" and "As you say, Logain."

Toveine hastily smoothed the sneer from her lips. Ignorant louts. The Tower accepted girls under fifteen only if they had already begun channeling. The other was interesting, though. The Two Rivers again. Everyone said al'Thor had turned his back on his home, but she was not so certain, Why was Gabrelle watching her?

"Last night," Sandomere said after a moment, "I learned that Mishraile is having private lessons from the M'Hael." He stroked his pointed beard with satisfaction, as if he had produced a gem of great price.

Perhaps he had, but Toveine could nor say what kind. Logain nodded slowly. The others exchanged silent looks with faces that might have been carved. She chewed frustration, watching. Too often it was like this, matters they saw no reason to comment on - or feared to?- and she did not understand. She always felt there were gems hidden there, beyond her reach.

A wide Cairhienin fellow, barely as tall as Logain's chest, opened his mouth, but whether he meant to speak of Mishraile, whoever he was, she never found out.

"Logain!" Welyn Kajima pounded down the street at a dead run, the bells at the ends of his black braids jangling. Another Dedicated, a man in his middle years who smiled too much, he had been there when Logain captured her, too. Kajima had bonded Jenare. He was almost out of breath when he pushed through the other men, and he was not smiling now,

"Logain," he panted, "the M'Hael's back from Cairhien, and he's posted new deserters on the board at the palace. You won't believe the names!" He spilled out his list in a breathless rush amid exclamations from the others that kept Toveine from hearing more than fragments.

"Dedicated have deserted before," the Cairhienin muttered. when Kajima was done,

"but never a full Asha'man. And now seven at once',"

"If you don't believe me," Kajima began, drawing himself up in a fussy manner. He had been a clerk, in Arafel.

"We believe you," Genhald said soothingly. "But Gedwyn and Torval, they are the M'Hael's men. Rochaid and Kisman, too. Why would they desert,' He gave them anything a king could want."

Kajima shook his head irritably, making his bells chime, 'You know the list never gives reasons. Just names."

"Good riddance," Kurin growled. "At least, it would be if we didn't have to hunt them down, now,"

"It's the others I cannot understand," Sandomere put in, "I was at Dumai's Wells. I saw the Lord Dragon choose, after. Dashiva had his head in the clouds, like always. But Flinn, Hopwil, Narishma? You never saw men more pleased. They were like lambs let loose in the barley shed,"

A sturdy fellow with gray in his hair spat. "Well, I wasn't at the Wells, but I went south against the Seanchan." His accents were Andoran. "Maybe the lambs didn't like the butcher's yard as much as they did the barley shed."

Logain had been listening without taking part, arms folded across his chest. His face was unreadable, a mask "Do you worry about the butcher's yard, Canler?" he said now.

The Andoran grimaced, then shrugged. "I reckon we're all headed there, soon or late, Logain. Don't see we have much choice, but I don't have to grin about it."

"As long as you're there on the day," Logain said quietly. He addressed. the man called Canler, but several of the others nodded.

Looking past the men, Logain considered Toveine and Gabrelle, Toveine tried to look as if she had not been eavesdropping, and remembering names fiercely, "Go inside out of the cold," he told them. "Have some tea to warm you. I'll be back as soon as I can. Don't touch my papers." Gathering up the other men with a gesture, he led them off in the direction Kajima had come from.

Toveine gritted her teeth in frustration. At least she would not have to follow him to the training grounds, past the so-called Traitor's Tree, where heads hung like diseased fruit from the bare branches, and watch men studying how to destroy with the Power, but she had hoped for another day to herself, free to wander about and see what she could learn. She had heard men speak of Taim's "palace" before, and today she had hoped to find it and perhaps catch a glimpse of the man whose name was as black as Logain's. Instead, she meekly followed the other woman through the red door. There was no use in fighting it,

Inside, she looked around the front room while Gabrelle hung her cloak on a peg. Despite the exterior, she had expected something grander for Logain. A low fire burned in a rough stone fireplace, A long narrow table and ladder-backed chairs stood on bare floorboards, A desk, only slightly more elaborate than the other furnishings, caught her eye. Stacks of lidded letterboxes littered the desktop, and leather folders full of long sheets of paper. Her fingers itched, but she knew that even if she sat at the desk, she would not be able to lay a finger on anything more than the pen or glass ink bottle.

With a sigh, she followed Gabrelle into the kitchen, where an iron stove gave too much heat and dirty breakfast dishes sat on a low cabinet beneath the window, Gabrelle filled a teakettle and put it on the stove, then took a green-glazed teapot and a wooden canister from another cabinet. Toveine draped her cloak over a chair

and sat down at the square table. She did not want tea unless it came with the breakfast she had missed, but she knew she was going to drink it.

The silly Brown nattered on as she carried out her domestic tasks like a contented farmwife. "I've learned a good deal already. Logain is the only full Asha'man to live here in this village. The others all live in Taim's 'palace.' They have servants, but Logain hired the wife of a man in training to cook and clean for him. She'll be here soon, and she thinks he put the sun in the sky, so we best be done talking anything important by then. He found your lapdesk,"

Toveine felt as though an icy hand had seized her throat. She tried to hide it, but Gabrelle was looking straight at her.

"He burned it, Toveine. After reading the contents. He seemed to think he had done us a favor."

The hand eased, and Toveine could breathe again. "Elaida's order was among my papers." She cleared her throat to rid herself of hoarseness. Elaida's order to gentle every man found here and then hang them on the spot, without the trial in Tar Valon required by Tower law, "She imposed harsh conditions, and these men would have reacted harshly, if they knew." In spite of the heat from the stove, she shivered.

That single paper could have gotten them all stilled and hanged, "Why would he do us favors?"

"I don't know why, Toveine. He isn't a villain, no more than most men. It could be as simple as that." Gabrelle set a plate of crusted rolls and another with white cheese on the table. "Or it could be that this bond is like the Warder bond in more ways than we know. Maybe he just did not want to experience the two of us being executed." Toveine's stomach rumbled, but she picked up a roll as if she did not care for more than a nibble.

"I suspect 'harsh' was a mild choice," Gabrelle went on, spooning tea into the

teapot. "I saw you flinch, Of course, they went to a great deal of trouble to bring us here. Fifty-one sisters in their midst, and even with the bond, they must fear we'll And some way around their orders, some loophole they missed. The obvious answer is, if we were dead, the Tower would be roused to fury. With us alive and captive, even Elaida will move cautiously." She laughed, quietly amused. "Your face, Toveine. Did you think I've spent all my time thinking about tangling my fingers in Logain's hair."

Toveine closed her mouth and put down the untouched roll. It was cold, anyway, and felt hard. Always a mistake to assume Browns were unworldly, absorbed in their books and studies to the exclusion of everything else. "What else have you seen?"

Still gripping the spoon, Gabrelle sat across the table from her and leaned forward intently, "Their wall may be strong when it's done, but this place is full of fractures. There is Mazrim Taim's faction, and Logain's faction, though I am

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uncertain either thinks of them so. Perhaps other factions, too, and certainly men who don't know there are factions. Fifty-one sisters should be able to make fry something of that, even with the bond. The second question is, what do we make of it?"

"The second questions Toveine demanded, but the other woman merely waited. "If we manage to break those fissures open," she said finally, "we scatter ten or 6 or a hundred bands across the world, each more dangerous than any army ever seen. Catching them all might take a lifetime and rip the world apart like a new Breaking, and that with Tarmon Gai'don on its way. That is, if this fellow al'Thor really is the Dragon Reborn," Gabrelle opened her mouth, but Toveine waved away whatever she

was going to say. That he was, very likely. It hardly mattered, here and now. "But if we don't..., Put down the rebellion and gather those sisters back to the Tower, call back every retired sister, and I don't know whether all of us together could destroy this place. I suspect half the Tower would die in the attempt, either way. What is the first question?"

Gabrelle leaned back in her chair, her face suddenly weary. "Yes, not an easy decision. And they bring in more men every day. Fifteen or twenty since we've been here, I believe."

"I won't be trifled with, Gabrelle! What is the first question?" The Brown's gaze sharpened, stared at her for a long moment.

"Soon, the shock will wear off," she said finally. "What comes then? The authority Elaida gave you is Anished, the expedition is finished. The first question is, are we fifty-one sisters united, or do we revert to being Browns and Reds, Yellows and Greens and Grays? And poor Ayako, who must be regretting that the Whites insisted on having a sister included. Lemai and Desandre stand highest among us." Gabrelle waved the spoon in admonishment. "The only chance we have of holding together is if you and I publicly submit to Desandre's authority. We must! That will start it, at any rate. I hope. If we can only bring a few others, to begin with, it will be a start." Toveine drew a deep breath and pretended to stare at nothing, as if considering. Submitting to a sister who stood higher than she was no hardship, in itself. The Ajahs had always kept secrets, and sometimes schemed a little against one another, but the open dissension in the Tower now appalled her. Besides, she had learned how to be humble before Mistress Dowell, She wondered how the woman enjoyed poverty, and working on a farm for a taskmistress even harsher than herself.

"I can bring myself to it," she said finally. "We should have a plan of action to present to Desandre and Lemai, if we mean to convince them," She already had one

partly formed, if not for presentation to anyone. "Oh, the water is boiling, Gabrelle."

Suddenly smiling, the foolish woman rose and hurried to the stove. Browns always were better reading books than people, come to think of it, Before Lopin and Taim and the rest were destroyed, they would help Toveine Gazal bring down Elaida.

The great city of Cairhien was a hulking mass inside massive walls, crowding the River Alguenya. The sky was clear and cloudless, but a cold wind blew and the sun shone on roofs covered with snow, glinted on icicles that showed no sign of melting.

The Alguenya was not Frozen, but small, jagged ice Roes fram farther upriver spun in the currents, now and then banging against the hulls of ships waiting their turns at the docks. Trade slowed for winter and wars, and the Dragon Reborn, but it never really stopped, nor until nations died. Despite the cold, wagons and carts and people flowed along streets that razored the terraced hills of the city. The City, it was called here.

In front of the square-towered Sun Palace, a crowd jammed together around the long entry ramp and stared up, merchants wrapped in fine woolens and nobles in velvets rubbing shoulders with grimy-faced laborers and dirtier refugees. No one cared who stood. next to him, and even the cutpurses forgot to follow their trade. Men and women departed, often shaking their heads, but others took their places, sometimes hoisting a child to get a better view of the Palace's ruined wing, where workmen were clearing away the rubble of the third story. Throughout the rest of Cairhien, craftsmen's hammers and creaking axles filled the air, together with the cries of shopkeepers, the complaints of buyers, the murmurs of merchants, The crowd before the Sun Palace was silent.

A mile from the Palace, Rand stood at a window in the grandly named Academy of

Cairhien, peering through the frosted panes at the stone-paved stableyard below.

There had been schools called Academies in Artur Hawkwing's time and before, centers

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of learning filled with scholars from every corner of the known world. The conceit

made no difference; they could have called it the Barn, so long as it did what he

wanted. More important concerns riled his thoughts. Had he made a mistake, returning

to Cairhien so soon? But he had been forced to flee too quickly, so it would be

known in the right quarters that he actually had fled. Too quickly to prepare

everything. There were questions he needed to ask, and tasks that could not be put

off. And Min wanted more of Master Fel's books. He could hear her muttering to herself

as she rummaged through the shelves where they had been stored after Fel's death,

With the bounty for books and manuscripts it did not yet possess, the Academy's

library was fast outgrowing the rooms that could be spared in Lord Barthanes' former

palace. Alanna sat in the back of his head, sulking it seemed; she would know he was

in the City. This near, she would be able to walk straight to him, but he would know

if she tried. Blessedly, Lews Therin was silent for the moment. Of late, the man

seemed madder than ever.

He rubbed a spot clear on a windowpane with his coatsleeve. Stout dark gray wool,

good enough for a man with a little money and few airs, it was not a garment anyone

would expect to see on the Dragon Reborn. The golden-maned Dragon's head on the back

of his hand glittered metallically; it presented no danger here. His boot touched

the leather scribe sitting below the window as he leaned forward to look out,

In the stableyard, the paving stones had been swept clear of snow, and a large wagon

stood surrounded by buckets like mushrooms in a clearing. Half a dozen men in heavy

coats and scarves and caps seemed to be working on the wagon's odd cargo, mechanical

devices crowded around a fat metal cylinder that took up more than half the wagon bed. Even stranger, the wagon shafts were missing. One of the men was moving split firewood from a large wheelbarrow into the side of a metal box fastened below one end of the big cylinder. The open door in the box glowed with the red of fire inside, and smoke rose from a tall narrow chimney. Another fellow danced around the wagon, bearded, capless and bald-headed, gesturing and apparently shouting orders that did not seem to make the others move any faster. Their breath made faint white plumes. It was almost warm inside; the Academy had large furnaces in the cellars and an extensive system of vents. The half-healed, never healing wounds in his side were hot.

He could not make out Min's curses - he was sure they were curses - but her tone was enough to say they would not be leaving yet unless he dragged her away. There were one or two items he might ask about still. "What are people saying? About the Palace?"

"What you might expect," Lord Dobraine answered behind him with level patience, as he had answered all the other questions. Even when he admitted a lack of knowledge, his tone had not changed. "Some say the Forsaken attacked you, or that Aes Sedai did. Those who think you swore fealty to the Amyrlin Seat h.vor the Forsaken. Either way, there is considerable debate on whether you are dead or kidnapped or fled. Most believe you live, wherever you are, or say they do. Some, a good many I fear, think...." His voice faded to silence.

"That I've gone mad," Rand finished for him in the same level tone. Not a matter for concern, or anger, "That I destroyed part of the Palace myself?" He would not speak of the dead, Fewer than other times, other places, but enough, and some of their names appeared whenever he closed his eyes, One of the men below climbed down from

the wagon, but the bald fellow caught his arm and dragged him back up, making him show what he had done, A man on the other side jumped to the pavement carelessly, skidding, and the capless man abandoned the first to chase around the wagon and make that one climb back up with him. What in the Light could they be doing,' Rand glanced over his shoulder, "They're not far wrong."

Dobraine Taborwin, a short man with the front of his head shaved and formally powdered and the rest of his hair nearly all gray, looked back with dark impassive eyes, Not a handsome man, but steady. Blue-and-white stripes marched down the front of his dark velvet coat from his neck almost to his knees, His signet ring was a carved ruby, and he wore another at his collar, not much larger yet flamboyant for a Cairhienin, He was High Seat of his House, with more battles behind him than most, and not much frightened him. He had proved that at Dumai's Wells.

But then, the stocky, graying woman patiently waiting her turn at his shoulder appeared just as unafraid. In sharp contrast to Dobraine's noble elegance, Idrien Tarsin's sensible brown woolens were plain enough for a shopkeeper, yet she had her own well of authority and dignity, Idrien was Headmistress of the Academy, the title she had given herself since most of the scholars and mechanics called themselves

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master of this or mistress of that, She ran the school with a strong hand and believed in practical things, new methods of surfacing roads or making dyes, improvements to foundries and mills, She also believed in the Dragon Reborn. Whether or not that was practical, it was pragmatic, and he would settle for that.

He turned back to the window and cleared his patch on the glass again, Maybe it was for heating water - some of those buckets seemed to have water in them still; in Shienar, they used big boilers to heat water for the baths - but why on a wagon?

"Has anyone left suddenly since I went? Or come unexpectedly?"

He did not expect that anyone had, anyone of importance to him. Between merchant's pigeons and White Tower eyes-and-ears - and Mazrim Taim; he must not forget Taim -

Lews Therin snarled wordlessly at the name - with all those pigeons and spies and babbling tongues, in a few more days the whole world would be aware that he had vanished from Cairhien. All the world that mattered, here and now. Cairhien was no longer the ground where the battle would be fought. Dobraine's answer surprised him,

"No one, except... , Ailil Riatin and some high Sea Folk official are both missing since the... attack." A bare pause, but a pause. Perhaps he was not so sure what had happened, either. Yet he would keep his word. He had proved that at Dumai's Wells, too. "No bodies were found, but they may have been killed. The Sea Folk Wavemistress refuses to countenance the possibility, though. She is raising a storm with demands that her woman be produced. In truth, Ailil may have fled to the countryside, Or gone to join her brother, despite her pledges to you. Your three Asha'man are still in the Sun Palace. Flinn, Narishma and Hopwil. They make people nervous. More so now than before." The Headmistress made a sound in her throat, and her shoes shifted audibly on the floorboards. They certainly made her nervous.

Rand dismissed the Asha'man. Unless much closer than the Palace, none was strong enough to have felt him open a gateway here, Those three had not been part of the attack on him, but a wise planner might have considered the chance of failure.

Planned how to keep someone close to him if he survived, You won't survive, Lews Therin whispered. None o us will survive.

Go back to sleep, Rand thought irritably. He knew he was not going to survive. But he wanted to, A derisive laugh answered in his head, but the sound thinned and was gone. The bald man was letting the others climb down, now, and rubbing his hands

together in a pleased fashion. Of all things, the fellow seemed to be giving a speech!

"Ailil and Shalon are alive, and they didn't flee," Rand said aloud. He had left them bound and gagged, stuffed under a bed, where they would have been found by servants in a few hours, though the shield he had woven on the Sea Folk Windfinder would have dissipated before that. The two women should have been able to free themselves then. "Look to Cadsuane. She'll have them in Lady Arilyn's palace," "Cadsuane Sedai is in and cut of the Sun Palace as if it were her own," Dobraine said judiciously, "but how could she have taken them out unseen? And why? Ailil is Toram's sister, yet his claim to the Sun Throne is dust now, if it was ever more. She is unimportant even as a counter, now. As for holding an Atha'an Miere of high rank.... To what purpose?"

Rand made his voice light, uncaring. "Why is she keeping Lady Caraline and High Lord Darlin as 'guests,' Dobraine? Why do Aes Sedai do anything? You'll And them where I said. If she lets you in to look," Why was not a foolish question. He just did not have the answer. Of course, Caraline Damodred and Ailil Riatin did represent the last two Houses to hold the Sun Throne. And Darlin Sisnera led the nobles in Tear who wanted him thrown out of their precious Stone, out of Tear, Rand frowned. He had been sure Cadsuane was focused on him despite her pretense otherwise, but what if it was not pretense? A relief, if so. Of course it was. The last thing he needed was an Aes Sedai who thought she could meddle in his affairs, The very last. Perhaps Cadsuane was directing her meddling elsewhere. Min had seen Sisnera wearing a strange crown; Rand had thought a great deal on that viewing of hers, He did not want to think of other things she had seen, concerning himself and the Green sister. Could it be as simple as Cadsuane thinking she could decide who would rule both Tear and Cairhien?

Simple.' He almost laughed. But that was how Aes Sedai behaved. And Shalon, the Windfinder? Possessing her might give Cadsuane leverage with Harine, the Wavemistress, but he suspected she had just been scooped up with Ailil, to try hiding who took the noblewoman. Cadsuane would have to be disabused. Who would rule in Tear and Cairhien had already been decided, He would point that out to her. Later. It stood far down his list of priorities.

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"Before I go, Dobraine, I need to give you -" Words froze on his tongue.

In the stableyard, the capless man had pulled a lever on the wagon, and one end of a long horizontal beam suddenly rose, then sank, driving a shorter beam down through a hole cut in the wagon bed. And, vibrating till it seemed ready to shake apart, trailing smoke from the chimney, the wagon lurched ahead, the beam rising and falling, slowly at first, then faster, It moved, without horses!

He did not realize he had spoken aloud until the Head-mistress answered him.

"Oh, that! That's Mervin Poel's steamwagon, as he calls it, my Lord Dragon,"

Disapproval freighted her high, startlingly youthful voice. "Claims he can pull a hundred wagons with the contraption. Nor unless he can make it go further than fifty paces without bits breaking or freezing up. It has only done that far once, that I know."

Indeed, the - steamwagon? - shuddered to a halt not twenty paces from where it first stood. Shuddered indeed; it seemed to be shaking harder by the heartbeat, Most of the men swarmed over it again, one of them frantically twisting at something with a cloth wrapped around his hand. Abruptly steam shot into the air from a pipe, and the shuddering slowed, stopped,

Rand shook his head. He remembered seeing this fellow Mervin, with a device that quivered on a tabletop and did nothing. And this marvel had come from that? He had thought it was meant to make music. That must be Mervin leaping about and shaking his fists at the others. What other odd things, what marvels, were people building here at the Academy?

When he asked, still watching the men in the courtyard work on the wagon, Idrien sniffed loudly. Respect for the Dragon Reborn held only a thin edge in her voice as she began, and quickly lost ground to disgust, "Bad enough I must give space to philosophers and historians and arithmetists and the like, but you said take in anyone who wanted to make anything new and let them stay if they showed progress. I suppose you hoped for weapons, but now I have dozens of dreamers and wastrels on my hands, every one with an old book or manuscript or six, all of which date back to the Compact of the Ten Nations, mind, if not the Age of Legends itself, or so they say, and they are all trying to make sense of drawings and sketches and descriptions of things they've never seen and maybe nobody ever did see. I have seen old manuscripts that talk about people with their eyes in their bellies, and animals ten feet tall with tusks longer than a man, and cities where -"

"But what are they making, Headmistress Tarsin." Rand demanded. The men working on the thing below moved with an air of purpose, not as if they saw failure, And it had moved.

She sniffed louder this time. "Foolishness, my Lord Dragon, that is what they make, Kin Tovere constructed his big looking glass, You can see the moon through it plain as your hand, and what he claims are other worlds, but what is the good of that? He wants to build a bigger, now, Maryl Harke makes huge kites she calls gliders, and come spring, she will be throwing herself off hills again. Puts your heart in your mouth to see her sailing downhill on the things; she will break more than her arm

next time one folds up on her, I warrant. Jander Parentakis believes he can move riverboats with waterwheels oE'a mill, or near enough, but when he put enough men into the boat to turn the cranks, there was no room for cargo, and any craft with sails could outrun it, Ryn Anhara traps lightning in big jars - I doubt even he knows why - and Niko Tokama is just as silly with her -"

Rand spun around so fast that she stepped back, and even Dobraine shifted on his feet, a swordsman's move. No, they were not sure of him at all. "He traps lightning?" he asked quietly.

Comprehension Qooded her blunt face, and she waved her hands in front of her, "No, no! Not like... like that!" Not like you, she had almost said. "It is a thing of wires and wheels and big clay jars and the Light knows what. He calls it lightning, and I saw a rat jump down on one of the jars once, on the metal rods sticking out of the top. It certainly looked struck by lightning," A hopeful tone entered her voice. "I can make him stop, if you wish."

He tried to picture someone riding on a kite, but the image was ludicrous. Catching lightning in jars was beyond his ability to imagine. And yet.... "Let them go on as before, Headmistress. Who knows? Maybe one of these inventions will turn out to be important. If any work as claimed, give the inventor a reward."

Dobraine's leathery, sun-darkened face looked dubious, though he almost managed to conceal it. Idrien bowed her head in sullen assent, and even curtsied, but plainly she thought he was asking to let pigs fly if they could.

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Rand was not certain he disagreed. Then again, maybe one of the pigs would grow wings, The wagon had moved, He wanted very badly to leave something behind,

something to help the world survive the new Breaking the Prophecies said he would bring. The trouble was, he had no idea what that might be, save for the schools themselves, Who knew what a marvel could do? Light, he wanted to build something that could last.

I thought I could build, Lews Therin murmured in his head, I was wrong. We are not builders, not you, or I, or the other one. We are destroyers. Destroyers.

Rand shivered, and scrubbed his hands through his hair. The other one? At times, the voice sounded sanest when it was the most mad. They were watching him, Dobraine very nearly hiding uncertainty, Idrien making no effort to, Straightening as if nothing was wrong, he drew two slim packets from inside his coat, Both carried the Dragon in a long lump of red wax on the outside. The belt buckle he was not wearing at the moment served for an impressive signet.

"The top one names you my steward in Cairhien," he said, handing the packets to Dobraine, A third still nestled next to his chest, for Gregorin den Lushenos, making him steward in Illian. "So there'll be no trouble with anyone questioning your authority while I'm gone," Dobraine could handle that sort of trouble with his armsmen, but best to make sure no one could claim ignorance or doubt. Maybe there would be no trouble to handle if everyone believed the Dragon Reborn would descend on transgressors. "There are orders about things I want done, but aside from those, use your own judgment, When the Lady Elayne lays claim to the Sun Throne, throw your full support behind her," Elayne. Oh, Light, Elayne, and Aviendha, At least they were safe. Min's voice sounded happier, now; she must have found Master Fel's books. He was going to let her follow him to her death because he was nor strong enough to stop her. Ilyena, Lews Therin moaned. Forgive me, Ilyena! Rand's voice came out as cold as winter's heart. "You'll know when to deliver the other. Whether to deliver it, Pry him out if need be, and decide by what he says. If you decide no, or he

refuses, I'll pick someone else, Not you."

Perhaps that was brusque, but Debraine's expression hardly changed. His eyebrows rose slightly at the name written on the second packet; that was all, He made a smooth bow, Cairhienin usually were smooth. "It shall be as you say. Forgive me, but you sound as though you mean to be gone a long while."

Rand shrugged. He trusted the High Lord as far as he trusted anyone. Almost as far.

"Who can say? The times are uncertain. Make sure Headmistress Tarsin has whatever coin she needs, and the men starting the school in Caemlyn. The school in Tear, as well, until matters change there,"

"As you say," Dobraine repeated, tucking the packets into his coat. His face betrayed no emotion, now. An experienced player in the Game of Houses, was Dobraine, For her part, the Headmistress managed to look pleased and disgruntled at the same time, and busied herself smoothing her dress unnecessarily the way women did when hard-pressed not to speak their minds. Complain how she would about dreamers and philosophers, she was jealous of the Academy's well-being. She would shed no tears if those others schools vanished and their scholars were forced to come to the Academy. Even the philosophers. What would she think of one particular order in Dobraine's packet?

"I've found everything I need," Min said, coming cut from the shelves staggering slightly under the weight of the three bulging cloth srips that hung from her. Her plain brown coat and breeches were very like what she had worn when he first saw her in Baerlon, For some reason, she had grumbled over them until anyone who knew her would have thought he was asking her to put on a dress, She smiled now, though, with delight and a hint of mischief, "I hope those packhorses are where we left them, or my Lord Dragon will have to be Rttd for a packsaddle."

Idrien gasped, scandalized to hear him addressed so, but Dobraine merely smiled a little. He had seen Min around Rand before.

Rand got rid of them as quickly as possible then, since they had heard and seen as much as he wanted them to - sent them off with a final admonition that he had never been there at all. Dobraine nodded as if he had expected no less. Idrien looked thoughtful as she left. If she let anything slip where a servant could hear, or a scholar, it would be all over the City in two days. There was not much time in any case. Perhaps no one who could tell had been close enough to feel him open a gateway here, but anyone looking for the signs would be sure by now there was a ta'veren in the city. It was not his plan to be found yet.

When the door closed behind them, he studied Min for a moment, then took one of the

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scrips and slung it from his shoulder.

"Only one," she said. Setting the others on the Boor, she planted her fists on her hips and scowled. "Sometimes you really are a sheepherder. These bags must be a hundred-weight each." But she sounded more amused than upset,

"You should have picked smaller books," he told her, pulling on riding gloves to hide the Dragons. "Or lighter," He turned toward the window, to fetch the leather scribe, and a wave of dizziness hit him, Knees turning to water, he stumbled, A shimmering face he could not make out flashed through his head. With an effort, he caught himself, forced his legs straight, And the whirling sensation vanished. Lews Therin panted hoarsely in the shadows. Could the face be his?

"If you think you'll make me carry them all that way, think again," Min grumbled.

"I've seen better pretending from stablehands, You could try falling down."

"Not this time." He was ready for what happened when he channeled; he could control

it to some extent. Usually. Most of the time. This dizziness without saidin was new, Maybe he had just turned too fast. And maybe pigs did fly. He settled the leather scrip's strap over his free shoulder. The men in the stableyard were still busy, Building. "Min -."

Her brows lowered immediately. She paused for an instant in drawing on her red gloves and began tapping her foot. A dangerous sign with any woman, especially one who carried knives. "We had this out, Rand bloody Dragon Reborn al'Thor! You are not leaving me behind!"

"The thought never crossed my mind," he lied. He was too weak; he could not make himself say the words, to make her stay. Too weak, he thought bitterly, and she might well die for it. The Light burn we forever!

It will, Lews Therin promised softly.

"I just thought you should know what we've been doing, and what we are going to do," Rand went on. "I haven't been very forthcoming, I suppose." Gathering himself, he seized saidin. The room seemed to whirl, and he rode the avalanche of fire and ice and filth with nausea seething in his belly. He was able to stand erect without swaying, though. Barely. And just able to weave the Ropes of a gateway that opened into a snowy clearing where two saddled horses were tethered to a low branch of an oak.

He was glad to see the animals still there. The clearing was well away from the nearest road, but there were still wanderers who had turned their backs on families and farms, trades and crafts, because the Dragon Reborn had broken all bonds. The Prophecies said so, On the other hand, a good many of those men and women, footsore and half-frozen now on top of it, were tired of searching without any notion what they were searching for. Even these nondescript mounts surely would have vanished

with the first man to find them unattended. He had gold enough to buy others, but he did not think Min would have enjoyed the hour's walk to the village where they had left the packhorses,

Hurrying through into the clearing, pretending the change from floor to knee-deep snow caused his stumble, he only waited until she had snatched up her bags of books and staggered through after him before releasing the Power. They were five hundred miles from Cairhien, and nearer Tar Valon than anywhere else of note, Alanna had faded in his head when the gateway closed.

"Forthcoming?" Min said, sounding suspicious. Of his motives, he hoped, or anything but the truth. The dizziness and nausea faded slowly, "You have been as open as a mussel, Rand, but I am not blind. First we traveled to Rhuidean, where you asked so many questions about this Shara place that anybody would think you meant to go there." Frowning faintly, she shook her head as she fastened one of her burdens to the saddle of her brown gelding. She grunted with the effort, but she was not about to set the other bag of books down in the snow. "I never thought the Aiel Waste was like that. That city is bigger than Tar Valon, even if it is half ruined. And all those fountains, and the lake. I couldn't even see the far side. I thought there wasn't any water in the Waste. And it was as cold as here; I thought the waste was hot!"

"In summer, you fry during the day, but you still freeze at night." He felt recovered enough to begin shifting his own burdens to the gray's saddle. Almost enough. He did it anyway. "If you already know everything, what was I doing besides asking questions?"

"The same as in Tear last night. Making sure every cat and blackbird knew you were there. In Tear, it was Chachin you asked about. It's obvious, You are trying to confuse anyone who tries to find out where you are and where you're going next." The

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second bag of books balancing the first behind her saddle, she untied her reins and climbed into the saddle. "So, am I blind?"

"Your eyes belong on an eagle." He hoped his pursuers saw as clearly. Or that whoever directed them did. It would not do to have them haring off the Light knew where. "I need to lay some more false trails, I think,"

"Why take the time? I know you have a plan, I know it concerns something in that leather scrip - a sa'angreal? - and I know it's important. Don't look so surprised. You barely let that bag out of your sight. Why not go ahead and do whatever it is you plan, then lay your false trails? And the real one, of course. You're going to turn on them when they least expect, you said. You can hardly do that unless they follow where you want."

"I wish you'd never started reading Herid Fel's books," he muttered sourly, pulling himself into the gray's saddle. His head spun only a little, "You puzzle out too much. Can I keep any secrets at all from you, now?"

"You never could, woolhead," she laughed, and then, contradicting herself, "What are you planning. Aside from killing Dashiva and the rest, I mean, I have a right to know if I'm traveling with you," As if she had not insisted on traveling with him.

"I'm going to cleanse the male half of the Source," he said in a flat voice. A momentous announcement. A grand scheme, more than grand. Grandiose, most would say, He might have said he intended to take an afternoon stroll, for all of Min's reaction. She simply looked at him, hands folded on the pommel of her saddle, until he went on.

"I don't know how long it will take, and once I start, I think everyone within a

thousand miles of me who can channel will know something is happening, I doubt I'll be able to just stop if Dashiva and the rest, or the Forsaken, suddenly appear to see what it is. The Forsaken, I can't do anything about, but with luck, I can finish the others." Maybe being ta'veren would give him the edge he needed so desperately. "Depend on luck, and Corlan Dashiva or the Forsaken, either one will have you for breakfast," she said, turning her horse out of the clearing, "Maybe I can think of a better way.

Come on. There's a warm fire at that inn. I hope you're going to let us have a hot meal before we leave."

Rand stared after her incredulously. You would have thought five renegade Asha'man, not to mention the Forsaken, were less bother than a sore tooth. Booting the gray ahead in a spray of snow, he caught up to her and rode in silence. He still had a few secrets from her, this sickness that had begun affecting him when he channeled, for one. That was the real reason he had to deal with Dashiva and the others first. It gave him time to get over the sickness. If that was possible. If not, he was not sure the two ter'angreal riding behind his saddle were going to be any use at all.