

KNIFE OF DREAMS



Sequel
to the #1
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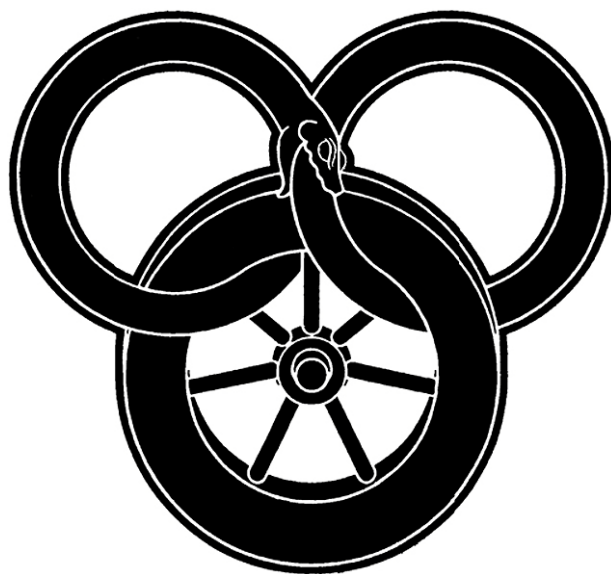
Book Eleven
of
*THE WHEEL
OF TIME*™

Robert
Jordan

KNIFE OF DREAMS

Book Eleven of The Wheel of Time

ROBERT JORDAN



In memory of Charles St. George Sinkler Adams
July 6 1976–April 13, 2005

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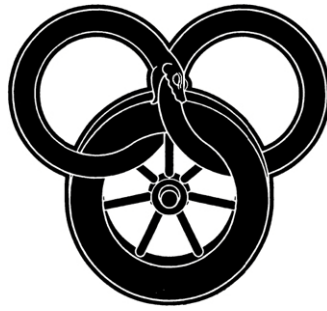
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The Sweetness of victory and the bitterness of defeat
are alike a knife of dreams.

—From *Fog and Steel* by Madoc Comadrin



PROLOGUE



Embers Falling on Dry Grass

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

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

Formerly a deep-country lodge of the King of Amadicia, the building was a huge, blue-roofed structure studded with red-painted balconies, a wooden palace

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

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

"No second thoughts for me," Galad broke in. His intentions had been fixed since yesterday. He was grateful, though. Trom had given him the opening he needed. They had simply appeared as he rode out, falling in with him without a word spoken. There had seemed no place for words, then. "But what about you three? You're taking a risk coming here with me. A risk you have no need to take. However the day runs, there will be marks against you. This is my business, and I give you leave to go about yours." Too stiffly said, but he could not find words this morning, or loosen his throat.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Why aren't you on your way to Nassad, Trom?” Disapproval colored Valda's words. “The other Lords Captain will be halfway there by now.” He himself always arrived late when meeting the Seanchan, perhaps to assert that

some shred of independence remained to the Children—finding him already preparing to depart was a surprise; this meeting must be very important—but he always made sure the other high-ranking officers arrived on time even when that required setting out before dawn. Apparently it was best not to press their new masters too far. Distrust of the Children was always strong in the Seanchan.

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

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

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

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

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

Galad felt cold. Not the cold of fear, but of emptiness. When Dain drunkenly let slip the confused rumors that had come to his ears, when Byar

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

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

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

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

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

“You see, Asunawa,” he said almost cheerfully, “the Children follow my orders, and the law, not a Questioner’s whims.” He held out his helmet to one side for someone to take. “I deny your preposterous charge, young Galad, and throw your foul lie in your teeth. For it is a lie, or at best a mad acceptance of some malignant rumor started by Darkfriends or others who wish the Children ill. Either way, you have defamed me in the vilest manner, so I accept your challenge to Trial Beneath the Light, where I will kill you.” That barely squeezed into the ritual, but he had denied the charge and accepted the challenge; it would suffice.

Realizing that he still held the helmet in an outstretched hand, Valda frowned at one of the dismounted Children, a lean Saldaean named Kashgar,

until the man stepped forward to relieve him of it. Kashgar was only an under-lieutenant, almost boyish despite a great hooked nose and thick mustaches like inverted horns, yet he moved with open reluctance, and Valda's voice was darker and acrid as he went on, unbuckling his sword belt and handing that over, too.

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

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

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

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

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

Standing in the middle of the courtyard in his gold-worked white coat with his fists on his hips, Valda turned in a tight circle. "Everyone move back against the walls," he commanded loudly. Horseshoes rang on the paving stones as the Children and the grooms obeyed. Asunawa and his Questioners snatched their animals' reins, the High Inquisitor wearing a face of cold fury. "Keep the middle clear. Young Damodred and I will meet here—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

His smile was all contempt, this time. “Nothing to say, boy? Small wonder considering that a blademaster is going to cut your head off in about one minute.

I want one thing straight in your mind before I kill you, though. The wench was hale the last I saw her, and if she's dead now, I'll regret it." That smile deepened, both in humor and disdain. "She was the best ride I ever had, and I hope to ride her again one day."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Valda wasted no time with maneuvering. The instant he was within range, *Plucking the Low-hanging Apple* flashed toward Galad's neck like lightning, as

though the man truly did intend to have his head in the first minute. There were several possible responses, all made instinct by hard training, but Byar's warnings floated in the dim recesses of his mind, and also the fact that Valda had warned him of this very thing. Warned him twice. Without conscious thought, he chose another way, stepping sideways and forward just as Plucking the Lowhanging Apple became the Leopard's Caress. Valda's eyes widened in surprise as his stroke missed Galad's left thigh by inches, widened more as Parting the Silk laid a gash down his right forearm, but he immediately launched into the Dove Takes Flight, so fast that Galad had to dance back before his blade could bite deeply, barely fending off the attack with Kingfisher Circles the Pond.

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

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

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

Again he launched Threading the Needle at Valda's shoulder, and again, again, all the while gulping air through his mouth. Only luck kept him from

taking more wounds in those exchanges. Or perhaps the Light really did shine on this fight.

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

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

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

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

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

"Where did Asunawa go?" Galad asked.

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

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

“The Lords Captain,” Galad said, and Trom nodded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It is how the law is written. And Valda did make his proclamation.

Besides, you had the courage to say what many have thought while holding their tongues, myself among them. Yours is a better plan for the Children than any I’ve heard since Pedron Niall died.”

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

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

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

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

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

Daylight began to grow on this cool spring morning, though the sun had yet to show even a sliver above the horizon, and Rodel Ituralde raised his gold-banded

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

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

Halfway between Elmora and the Amadician border, Serana sat in a flat grassy valley among forested hills, with at least a mile to the trees in any direction save his, and a small, reed-fringed lake fed by two wide streams lay between him and the village. Not a place that could be surprised by daylight. It had been sizable before the Seanchan came, a stopping point for the merchant trains heading east, with over a dozen inns and nearly as many streets. Village folk were already getting about their day's tasks, women balancing baskets on their heads as they glided down the village streets and others starting the fires under laundry kettles behind their houses, men striding along toward their workplaces, sometimes pausing to exchange a few words. A normal morning, with children already running and playing, rolling hoops and tossing beanbags among the throng. The clang of a smithy rose, dim with the distance. The smoke from breakfast fires was fading at the chimneys.

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

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

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

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

Most of the men down there were hired workmen, not soldiers, and only a hundred or so of those Seanchan. Still, a company of three hundred Taraboners in stripe-painted armor had ridden in at noon the day before, more than doubling their numbers and requiring him to change his plans. Another party of Taraboners, as large, had entered the camp at sunset, just in time to eat and bed down wherever they could lay their blankets. Candles and lamp oil were luxuries for soldiers. There was one of those leashed women, a *damane*, in the camp, too. He wished he could have waited until she left—they must have been taking her elsewhere; what use for a *damane* at a supply camp?—but today was the appointed day, and he could not afford to give the Taraboners reason to claim he

was holding back. Some would snatch at any reason to go their own way. He knew they would not follow him much longer, yet he needed to hold as many as he could for a few days more.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Again it seemed the Taraboner heard his command, finally raising a hand to halt his men. At least they were still a half-mile or more from the village. The

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

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

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

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

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

The officer leaned over to converse with the *sul'dam*. If he turned her and

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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