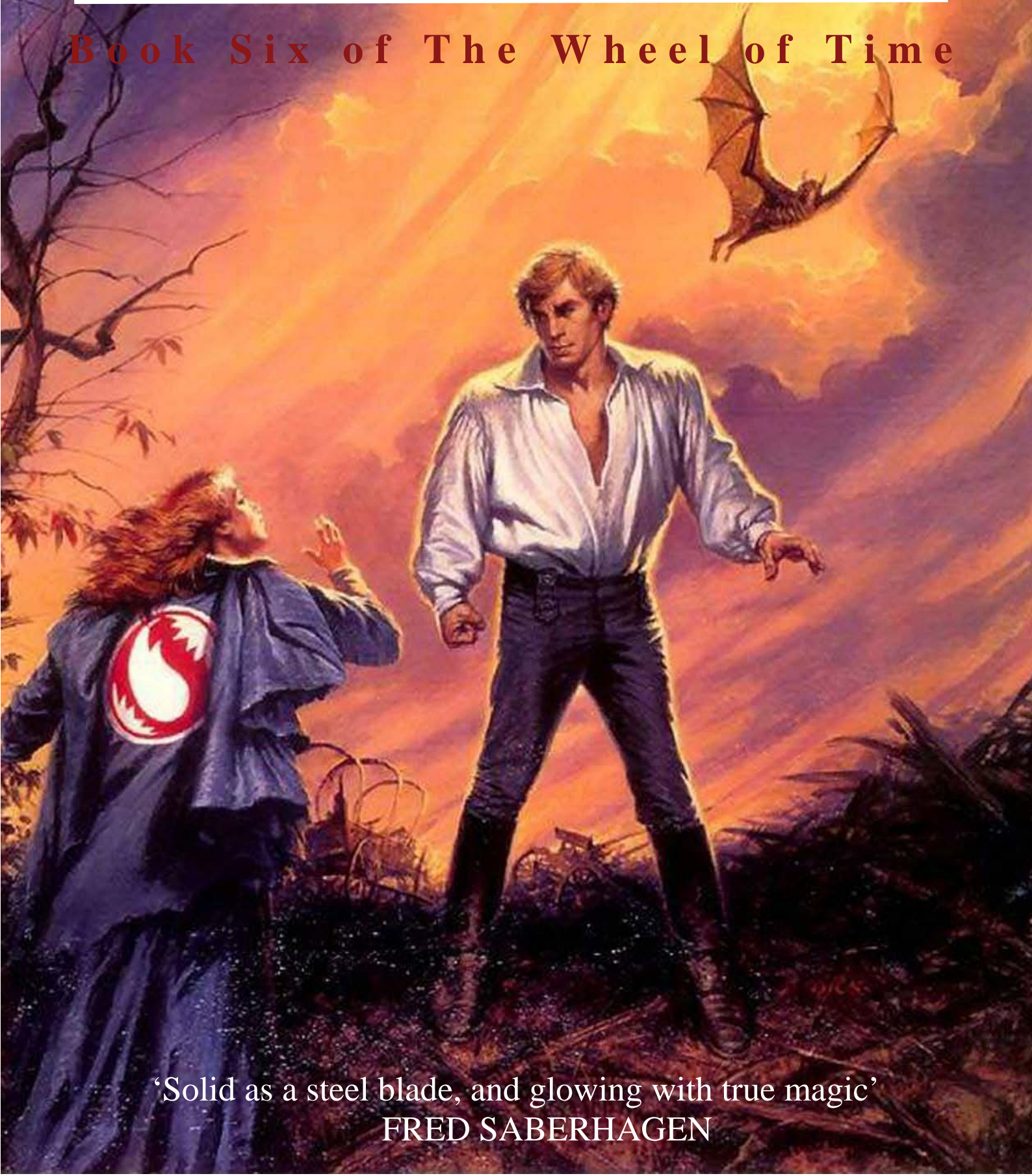


ROBERT JORDAN
LORD OF CHAOS

Book Six of The Wheel of Time



‘Solid as a steel blade, and glowing with true magic’
FRED SABERHAGEN

LORD OF CHAOS

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For Betsy

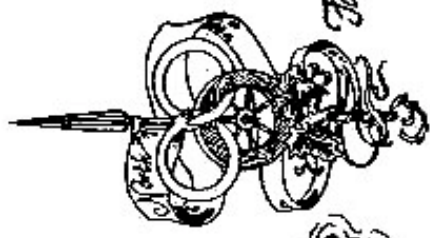
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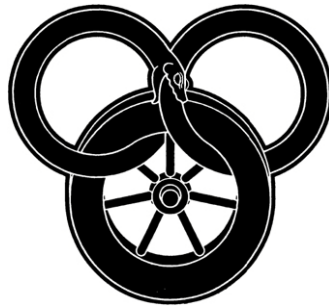
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The lions sing and the hills take flight.
The moon by day and the sun by night.
Blind woman, deaf man, jackdaw fool.
Let the Lord of Chaos rule.

—chant from a children's game
heard in Great Aravalon,
the Fourth Age



PROLOGUE



The First Message

Demandred stepped out onto the black slopes of Shayol Ghul, and the gateway, a hole in reality's fabric, winked out of existence. Above, roiling gray clouds hid the sky, an inverted sea of sluggish ashen waves crashing around the mountain's hidden peak. Below, odd lights flashed across the barren valley, washed-out blues and reds, failing to dispel the dusky murk that shrouded their source. Lightning streaked up at the clouds, and slow thunder rolled. Across the slope steam and smoke rose from scattered vents, some holes as small as a man's hand and some large enough to swallow ten men.

He released the One Power immediately, and with the vanished sweetness went the heightened senses that made everything sharper, clearer. The absence of *saidin* left him hollow, yet here only a fool would even appear ready to channel. Besides, here only a fool would want to see or smell or feel too clearly.

In what was now called the Age of Legends, this had been an idyllic island in a cool sea, a favorite of those who enjoyed the rustic. Despite the steam it was bitter cold, now; he did not allow himself to feel it, but instinct made him pull his fur-lined velvet cloak closer. Feathery mist marked his breath, barely visible before the air drank it. A few hundred leagues north the world was pure ice, but Thakan'dar was always dry as any desert, though always wrapped in winter.

There was water, of a sort, an inky rivulet oozing down the rocky slope beside a gray-roofed forge. Hammers rang inside, and with every ring, white light flared in the cramped windows. A ragged woman crouched in a hopeless heap against the forge's rough stone wall, clutching a babe in her arms, and a spindly girl buried her face in the woman's skirts. Prisoners from a raid down into the Borderlands, no doubt. But so few; the Myrddraal must be gnashing their teeth. Their blades failed after a time and had to be replaced, no matter that raids

into the Borderlands had been curtailed.

One of the forgers emerged, a thick slow-moving man shape that seemed hacked out of the mountain. The forgers were not truly alive; carried any distance from Shayol Ghul, they turned to stone, or dust. Nor were they smiths as such; they made nothing but the swords. This one's two hands held a sword blade in long tongs, a blade already quenched, pale like moonlit snow. Alive or not, the forger took care as it dipped the gleaming metal into the dark stream. Whatever semblance of life it had could be ended by the touch of that water. When the metal came out again, it was dead black. But the making was not done yet. The forger shuffled back inside, and suddenly a man's voice raised a desperate shout.

"No! No! NO!" He shrieked then, the sound dwindling away without losing intensity, as though the screamer had been yanked into unimaginably far distance. Now the blade was done.

Once more a forger appeared—perhaps the same, perhaps another—and hauled the woman to her feet. Woman, babe and child began to wail, but the infant was pulled away and shoved into the girl's arms. At last the woman found a scrap of resistance. Weeping, she kicked wildly, clawed at the forger. It paid no more mind than stone would have. The woman's cries vanished as soon as she was inside. The hammers began ringing again, drowning the sobs of the children.

One blade made, one making, and two to come. Demandred had never before seen fewer than fifty prisoners waiting to give their mite to the Great Lord of the Dark. The Myrddraal must be gnashing their teeth, indeed.

"Do you loiter when you have been summoned by the Great Lord?" The voice sounded like rotted leather crumbling.

Demandred turned slowly—how dare a Halfman address him in that tone—but the quelling words died in his mouth. It was not the eyeless stare of its pasty-pale face; a Myrddraal's gaze struck fear in any man, but he had rooted fear out of himself long ago. Rather, it was the black-clad creature itself. Every Myrddraal was the height of a tall man, a sinuous imitation of a man, as alike as though cast in one mold. This one stood head and shoulders taller.

"I will take you to the Great Lord," the Myrddraal said. "I am Shaidar Haran." It turned away and began climbing the mountain, like a serpent in its fluid motion. Its inky cloak hung unnaturally still, without even a ripple.

Demandred hesitated before following. Halfmen's names were always in the Trollocs' tongue-wrenching language. "Shaidar Haran" came from what people now named the Old Tongue. It meant "Hand of the Dark." Another surprise, and Demandred did not like surprises, especially not at Shayol Ghul.

The entry into the mountain could have been one of the scattered vents,

except that it emitted no smoke or steam. It gaped enough for two men abreast, but the Myrddraal kept the lead. The way slanted down almost immediately, the tunnel floor worn smooth as polished tiles. The cold faded as Demandred followed Shaidar Haran's broad back down and down, slowly replaced by increasing heat. Demandred was aware of it, but did not let it touch him. A pale light rose from the stone, filling the tunnel, brighter than the eternal twilight outside. Jagged spikes jutted from the ceiling, stony teeth ready to snap shut, the Great Lord's teeth to rend the unfaithful or the traitor. Not natural, of course, but effective.

Abruptly, he noticed something. Every time he had made this journey, those spikes had all but brushed the top of his head. Now they cleared the Myrddraal's by two hands or more. That surprised him. Not that the height of the tunnel changed—the strange was ordinary here—but the extra space the Halfman was given. The Great Lord gave his reminders to Myrddraal as well as men. That extra space was a fact to be remembered.

The tunnel opened out suddenly onto a wide ledge overlooking a lake of molten stone, red mottled with black, where man-high flames danced, died and rose again. There was no roof, only a great hole rising through the mountain to a sky that was not the sky of Thakan'dar. It made that of Thakan'dar look normal, with its wildly striated clouds streaking by as though driven by the greatest winds the world had ever seen. This, men called the Pit of Doom, and few knew how well they had named it.

Even after all his visits—and the first lay well over three thousand years in the past—Demandred felt awe. Here he could sense the Bore, the hole drilled through so long ago to where the Great Lord had lain imprisoned since the moment of Creation. Here the Great Lord's presence washed over him. Physically, this place was no closer to the Bore than any other in the world, but here there was a thinness in the Pattern that allowed it to be sensed.

Demandred came as close to smiling as he ever did. What fools they were who opposed the Great Lord. Oh, the Bore was still blocked, though more tenuously than when he had wakened from his long sleep and broken free of his own prison in it. Blocked, but larger than when he woke. Still not so large as when he had been cast into it with his fellows at the end of the War of Power, but at each visit since waking, a little wider. Soon the blockage would be gone, and the Great Lord would reach out across the earth again. Soon would come the Day of Return. And he would rule the world for all time. Under the Great Lord, of course. And with those of the other Chosen who survived, also of course.

“You may leave now, Halfman.” He did not want the thing here to see the

ecstasy overcome him. The ecstasy, and the pain.

Shaidar Haran did not move.

Demandred opened his mouth—and a voice exploded in his head.

DEMANDRED.

To call it a voice was to call a mountain a pebble. It nearly crushed him against the inside of his own skull; it filled him with rapture. He sank to his knees. The Myrddraal stood watching impassively, but only a small part of him could even notice the thing with that voice filling his brain.

DEMANDRED. HOW FARES THIS WORLD?

He was never sure how much the Great Lord knew of the world. He had been as startled by ignorance as by knowledge. But he had no doubt what the Great Lord wanted to hear.

“Rahvin is dead, Great Lord. Yesterday.” There was pain. Euphoria too strong became pain quickly. His arms and legs twitched. He was sweating, now. “Lanfear has vanished without a trace, just as Asmodean did. And Graendal says Moghedien failed to meet her as they had agreed. Also yesterday, Great Lord. I do not believe in coincidence.”

THE CHOSEN DWINDLE, DEMANDRED. THE WEAK FALL AWAY. WHO BETRAYS ME SHALL DIE THE FINAL DEATH. ASMODEAN, TWISTED BY HIS WEAKNESS. RAHVIN DEAD IN HIS PRIDE. HE SERVED WELL, YET EVEN I CANNOT SAVE HIM FROM BALEFIRE. EVEN I CANNOT STEP OUTSIDE OF TIME. For an instant terrible anger filled that awful voice, and—could it be frustration? An instant only. DONE BY MY ANCIENT ENEMY, THE ONE CALLED DRAGON. WOULD YOU UNLEASH THE BALEFIRE IN MY SERVICE, DEMANDRED?

Demandred hesitated. A bead of sweat slid half an inch on his cheek; it seemed to take an hour. For a year during the War of Power, both sides had used balefire. Until they learned the consequences. Without agreement, or truce—there had never been a truce any more than there had been quarter—each side simply stopped. Entire cities died in balefire that year, hundreds of thousands of threads burned from the Pattern; reality itself almost unraveled, world and universe evaporating like mist. If balefire was unleashed once more, there might be no world to rule.

Another point pricked him. The Great Lord already knew how Rahvin had died. And seemed to know more of Asmodean than he. “As you command, Great Lord, so shall I obey.” His muscles might be jerking, but his voice was rock steady. His knees began to blister from the hot stone, yet the flesh might as well have been someone else’s.

SO YOU SHALL.

“Great Lord, the Dragon can be destroyed.” A dead man could not wield balefire again, and perhaps then the Great Lord would see no need for it. “He is ignorant and weak, scattering his attentions in a dozen directions. Rahvin was a vain fool. I—”

WOULD YOU BE NAE’BLIS?

Demandred’s tongue froze. Nae’blis. The one who would stand only a step below the Great Lord, commanding all others. “I wish only to serve you, Great Lord, however I may.” Nae’blis.

THEN LISTEN, AND SERVE. HEAR WHO WILL DIE AND WHO LIVE.

Demandred screamed as the voice crashed home. Tears of joy rolled down his face.

Unmoving, the Myrddraal watched him.

“Stop fidgeting.” Nynaeve testily flipped her long braid over her shoulder. “This won’t work if you twitch around like children with an itch.”

Neither of the women across the rickety table appeared any older than she, though they were by twenty years or more, and neither was really fidgeting, but the heat had Nynaeve on edge. The small windowless room seemed airless. She dripped sweat; they appeared cool and dry. Leane, in a Domani dress of too-thin blue silk, merely shrugged; the tall coppery-skinned woman possessed an apparently infinite store of patience. Usually. Siuan, fair and sturdy, seldom had any.

Now Siuan grunted and resettled her skirts irritably; she used to wear fairly plain clothes, but this morning she was in fine yellow linen embroidered with a Tairen maze around a neckline that barely missed being too low. Her blue eyes were cold as deep well water. As cold as deep well water would have been if the weather had not gone mad. Her dresses might have changed, but not her eyes. “It won’t work in any case,” she snapped. Her manner of speaking was the same, too. “You can’t patch a hull when the whole boat’s burned. Well, it’s a waste of time, but I promised, so get on with it. Leane and I have work to do.” The pair of them ran the networks of eyes-and-ears for the Aes Sedai here in Salidar, the agents who sent in reports and rumors of what was going on in the world.

Nynaeve smoothed her own skirts to soothe herself. Her dress was plain white wool, with seven bands of color at the hem, one for each Ajah. An Accepted’s dress. It annoyed her more than she could ever have imagined. She would much rather have been in the green silk she had packed away. She was

willing to admit her acquired taste for fine clothes, privately at least, but her choice of that particular dress was only for comfort—it was thin, light—not because green seemed one of Lan’s favorite colors. Not at all. Idle dreaming of the worst sort. An Accepted who put on anything except the banded white would soon learn she was a *long* step below Aes Sedai. Firmly she put all that out of her head. She was not here to fret over fripperies. He liked blue, too. No!

Delicately she probed with the One Power, first at Sivan, then Leane. In a manner of speaking, she was not channeling at all. She could not channel a scrap unless angry, could not even sense the True Source. Yet it came to the same thing. Fine filaments of *saidar*, the female half of the True Source, sifted through the two women at her weaving. They just did not originate with her.

On her left wrist Nynaeve wore a slender bracelet, a simple segmented silver band. Mainly silver, anyway, and from a special source, though that made no difference. It was the only piece of jewelry she wore aside from the Great Serpent ring; Accepted were firmly discouraged from wearing much jewelry. A matching necklace snugged around the neck of the fourth woman, on a stool against the rough-plastered wall with her hands folded in her lap. Clad in a farmer’s rough brown wool, with a farmer’s worn sturdy face, she did not sweat a drop. She did not move a muscle either, but her dark eyes watched everything. To Nynaeve, the radiance of *saidar* surrounded her, but it was Nynaeve who directed the channeling. Bracelet and necklace created a link between them, much in the way Aes Sedai could link to combine their power. Something about “absolutely identical matrices” was involved, according to Elayne, after which the explanation truly became incomprehensible. In truth, Nynaeve did not think Elayne understood half as much as she pretended. For herself, Nynaeve did not understand at all, except that she could feel the other woman’s every emotion, feel the woman herself, but tucked away in a corner of her head, and that all the other woman’s grasp of *saidar* was in her control. Sometimes she thought it would have been better if the woman on the stool were dead. Simpler, certainly. Cleaner.

“There’s . . . something torn, or cut,” Nynaeve muttered, wiping absently at the sweat on her face. It was just a vague impression, barely there at all, but it was also the first time she had sensed more than emptiness. It could be imagination, and the desperate wanting to find something, anything.

“Severing,” the woman on the stool said. “That was what it was called, what you name stilling for women and gentling for men.”

Three heads swiveled toward her; three sets of eyes glared with fury. Sivan and Leane had been Aes Sedai until they were stilled during the coup in the

White Tower that put Elaida on the Amyrlin Seat. Stilled. A word to cause shudders. Never to channel again. But always to remember, and know the loss. Always to sense the True Source and know you could never touch it again. Stilling could not be Healed any more than death.

That was what everyone believed, anyway, but in Nynaeve's opinion the One Power should be able to Heal anything short of death. "If you have something useful to add, Marigan," she said sharply, "then say it. If not, keep quiet."

Marigan shrank back against the wall, eyes glittering and fixed on Nynaeve. Fear and hate rolled through the bracelet, but they always did to one degree or another. Captives seldom loved their captors, even—perhaps especially—when they knew they deserved captivity and worse. The problem was that Marigan also said severing—stilling—could not be Healed. Oh, she was full of claims that anything else except death could be Healed in the Age of Legends, that what the Yellow Ajah called Healing now was only the crudest hasty battlefield work. But try to pin her down on specifics, on even a hint of how, and you found nothing there. Marigan knew as much about Healing as Nynaeve did about blacksmithing, which was that you stuck metal in hot coals and hit it with a hammer. Certainly not enough to make a horseshoe. Or Heal much beyond a bruise.

Twisting around in her chair, Nynaeve studied Sivan and Leane. Days of this, whenever she could pry them away from their other work, and so far she had learned nothing. Suddenly she realized she was turning the bracelet on her wrist. Whatever the gain, she hated being linked to the woman. The intimacy made her skin crawl. *At least I might learn something*, she thought. *And it couldn't fail any worse than everything else has.*

Carefully she undid the bracelet—the clasp was impossible to find unless you knew how—and handed it to Sivan. "Put this on." Losing the Power was bitter, but this had to be done. And losing the waves of emotion was like taking a bath. Marigan's eyes followed the narrow length of silver as if hypnotized.

"Why?" Sivan demanded. "You tell me this thing only works—"

"Just put it on, Sivan."

Sivan eyed her stubbornly for a moment—Light, but the woman could be obstinate!—before closing the bracelet around her wrist. A look of wonder came onto her face immediately, then her eyes narrowed at Marigan. "She hates us, but I knew that. And there's fear, and . . . shock. Not a glimmer on her face, but she's shocked to her toes. I don't think she believed I could use this thing, either."

Marigan shifted uneasily. So far only two who knew about her could use

the bracelet. Four would give more chances for questions. On the surface she seemed to be cooperating fully, but how much was she hiding? As much as she could, Nynaeve was sure.

With a sigh, Sivan shook her head. “And I cannot. I should be able to touch the Source through her, isn’t that right? Well, I can’t. A grunter could climb trees first. I’ve been stilled, and that is that. How do you get this thing off?” She fumbled at the bracelet. “How do you bloody get it off?”

Gently Nynaeve laid a hand over Sivan’s on the bracelet. “Don’t you see? The bracelet won’t work for a woman who can’t channel any more than the necklace would work on her. If I put either on one of the cooks, it would be no more than a pretty piece for her.”

“Cooks or no cooks,” Sivan said flatly, “I cannot channel. I have been stilled.”

“But there is something there to be Healed,” Nynaeve insisted, “or you’d feel nothing through the bracelet.”

Sivan jerked her arm free and stuck her wrist out. “Take it off.”

Shaking her head, Nynaeve complied. Sometimes Sivan could be as bullheaded as any man!

When she held the bracelet toward Leane, the Domani woman lifted her wrist eagerly. Leane pretended to be as sanguine over having been stilled as Sivan was—as Sivan pretended to be—but she did not always succeed. Supposedly, the only way to survive stilling for long was to find something else to fill your life, to fill the hole left by the One Power. For Sivan and Leane that something was running their networks of agents, and more importantly, trying to convince the Aes Sedai here in Salidar to support Rand al’Thor as the Dragon Reborn without letting any of the Aes Sedai know what they were doing. The question was whether that was enough. The bitterness on Sivan’s face, and the delight on Leane’s as the bracelet snapped shut, said that maybe nothing could ever be.

“Oh, yes.” Leane had a brisk, clipped way of speaking. Except when talking to men, anyway; she was Domani, after all, and of late making up for time lost in the Tower. “Yes, she really is stunned, isn’t she? Beginning to control it now, though.” For a few moments she sat silently, considering the woman on the stool. Marigan stared back warily. At last, Leane shrugged. “I cannot touch the Source, either. And I tried to make her feel a fleabite on her ankle. If it had worked, she would have had to show something.” That was the other trick of the bracelet; you could make the woman wearing the necklace feel physical sensations. Only the sensations—there was no mark whatever you did,

no real damage—but the feel of a sound switching or two had sufficed to convince Marigan that cooperation was her best choice. That and the alternative, a quick trial followed by execution.

Despite her failure, Leane watched closely as Nynaeve undid the bracelet and refastened it on her own wrist. It seemed that she, at least, had not given up completely on channeling again one day.

Regaining the Power was wonderful. Not as wonderful as drawing *saidar* herself, being filled with it, but even touching the Source through the other woman was like redoubling the life in her veins. To hold *saidar* inside was to want to laugh and dance with pure joy. She supposed that one day she would become used to it; full Aes Sedai must. Balanced against that, linking with Marigan was a small price. “Now that we know there’s a chance,” she said, “I think—”

The door banged open, and Nynaeve was on her feet before she knew it. She never thought of using the Power; she would have screamed if her throat had not closed tight. She was not the only one, but she hardly noticed Sivan and Leane leaping up. The fear cascading through the bracelet seemed an echo of her own.

The young woman who shut the splintery wooden door behind her took no notice of the commotion she had caused. Tall and straight in an Accepted’s banded white dress, with sun-gold curls nestled on her shoulders, she looked spitting mad. Even with her face tight with anger and dripping sweat she somehow managed to look beautiful, though; it was a knack Elayne had. “Do you know what they’re doing? They are sending an embassy to . . . to Caemlyn! And they refuse to let me go! Sheriam *forbade* me to mention it again. Forbade me even to *speak* of it!”

“Did you never learn to knock, Elayne?” Straightening her chair, Nynaeve sat down again. Fell, really; relief weakened her knees. “I thought you *were* Sheriam.” Just the thought of discovery cored out her middle.

To her credit, Elayne blushed and apologized immediately. Then spoiled it by adding, “But I don’t see why you were so goosey. Birgitte is still outside, and you *know* she would warn you if anyone else came close. Nynaeve, they *must* let me go.”

“They *must* do nothing of the kind,” Sivan said gruffly. She and Leane were seated again, too. Sivan sat up straight, as always, but Leane sagged back, as flimsy as Nynaeve’s knees. Marigan was leaning against the wall, breathing hard, eyes closed and hands pressed hard against the plaster. Relief and stark terror surged through the bracelet in alternating jolts.

“But—”

Siuan did not allow Elayne another word. “Do you think Sheriam, or any of the others, will let the Daughter-Heir of Andor fall into the hands of the Dragon Reborn? With your mother dead—”

“I don’t believe that!” Elayne snapped.

“You don’t believe Rand killed her,” Siuan went on relentlessly, “and that’s a different thing. I don’t, either. But if Morgase were alive, she would come forward and acknowledge him the Dragon Reborn. Or, if she believed him a false Dragon in spite of the proof, she’d be organizing resistance. None of my eyes-and-ears have heard a whisper of either. Not just in Andor, but not here in Altara and not in Murandy.”

“They *have*,” Elayne forced in. “There’s rebellion in the west.”

“Against Morgase. Against. If it’s not a rumor, too.” Siuan’s voice was flat as a planed board. “Your mother is dead, girl. Best to admit as much and get your weeping done.”

Elayne’s chin rose, a very annoying habit she had; she was the picture of icy arrogance, though most men seemed to find it attractive for some reason. “You complain continually over how long it is taking to get in touch with all of your agents,” she said coolly, “but I will set aside whether you can have heard all there is to hear. Whether my mother is alive or not, my place is in Caemlyn, now. I *am* Daughter-Heir.”

Siuan’s loud snort made Nynaeve jump. “You’ve been Accepted long enough to know better.” Elayne had as much potential as had been seen in a thousand years. Not as much as Nynaeve, if she ever learned to channel at will, but still enough to make any Aes Sedai’s eyes light up. Elayne’s nose wrinkled—she knew very well that if she had already been on the Lion Throne, the Aes Sedai still would have gotten her away for training, by asking if possible, by stuffing her into a barrel if necessary—and she opened her mouth, but Siuan did not even slow down. “True, they’d not mind you taking the throne sooner than later; there hasn’t been a Queen who was openly Aes Sedai in far too long. But they won’t let you go until you’re a full sister, and even then, because you *are* Daughter-Heir and will be Queen soon, they won’t let you near the Dragon bloody Reborn until they know how far they can trust him. Especially since this . . . *amnesty* of his.” Her mouth twisted sourly around the word, and Leane grimaced.

Nynaeve’s tongue curdled, too. She had been brought up to fear any man who could channel, fated to go mad and, before the Shadow-tainted male half of the Source killed him horribly, bring terror to everyone around him. But Rand,

whom she had watched grow up, was the Dragon Reborn, born both as a sign that the Last Battle was coming and to fight the Dark One in that battle. The Dragon Reborn; humanity's only hope—and a man who could channel. Worse, reports were that he was trying to gather others like him. Of course, there could not be many. Any Aes Sedai would hunt down one of those—the Red Ajah did little else—but they found few, far fewer than once, according to the records.

Elayne was not about to give up, though. That was one admirable thing about her; she would not give up if her head were on the block and the axe descending. She stood there with her chin up, facing Siuan's stare, which Nynaeve often found hard to do. "There are two clear reasons why I should go. First, whatever has happened to my mother, she *is* missing, and as Daughter-Heir, I can calm the people and assure them the succession is intact. Second, I can approach Rand. He trusts me. I would be *far* better than anyone the Hall chooses."

The Aes Sedai here in Salidar had chosen their own Hall of the Tower, a Hall-in-exile, as it were. They were supposed to be mulling over the choice of a new Amyrlin Seat, a rightful Amyrlin to challenge Elaida's claim to the title and the Tower, but Nynaeve had not seen much sign of it.

"So kind of you to sacrifice yourself, child," Leane said dryly. Elayne's expression did not change, yet she colored furiously; few outside this room knew, and no Aes Sedai, but Nynaeve had no doubt that Elayne's first act in Caemlyn would be to get Rand alone and kiss him within an inch of his life. "With your mother . . . missing . . . if Rand al'Thor has you, and Caemlyn, he has Andor, and the Hall won't let him have any more of Andor than they have to, or anywhere else if they can help it. He carries Tear and Cairhien in his pocket, and the Aiel as well, it seems. Add Andor, and Murandy and Altara—with us in it—fall if he sneezes. He is growing too powerful, too fast. He might decide he doesn't need us. With Moiraine dead, there's no one near him we can trust."

That made Nynaeve wince. Moiraine was the Aes Sedai who had brought her and Rand out of the Two Rivers and changed their lives. Her and Rand and Egwene and Mat and Perrin. She had wanted for so long to make Moiraine pay for what she had done to them that losing her was like losing a piece of herself. But Moiraine was dead in Cairhien, taking Lanfear with her; she was fast becoming a legend among the Aes Sedai here, the only Aes Sedai to have killed one of the Forsaken, much less two. The only good thing Nynaeve could find in it, much as it shamed to find any good, was that now Lan was freed from being Moiraine's Warder. If she could ever find him.

Siuan took up immediately where Leane left off. "We can't afford to let the

boy go sailing off with no guidance at all. Who knows what he might do? Yes, yes, I know you're ready to argue for him, but I don't care to hear it. I'm trying to balance a live silverpike on my nose, girl. We can't let him grow too strong before he accepts us, and yet we don't dare hold him back too much. And I'm trying to keep Sheriam and the others convinced they *should* support him when half the Hall secretly don't want anything to do with him, and the other half think in their heart of hearts that he should be gentled, Dragon Reborn or not. In any case, whatever your arguments, I suggest you heed Sheriam. You won't change any minds, and Tiana doesn't have enough novices here to keep her busy."

Elayne's face tightened angrily. Tiana Noselle, a Gray sister, was Mistress of Novices here in Salidar. An Accepted had to step considerably further out of line to be sent to Tiana than did a novice, but by the same token, the visit was always that much more shaming and painful. Tiana might show a little kindness to a novice, if only a little; she felt Accepted should know better, and made sure they felt the same long before they left her small cubbyhole of a study.

Nynaeve had been studying Siuan, and now something popped into her head. "You knew all about this . . . embassy, or whatever it is . . . didn't you? You two always have your heads together with Sheriam and her little circle." The Hall might have all the supposed authority until they chose an Amyrlin, but Sheriam and the handful of other Aes Sedai who had first organized the arrivals in Salidar still kept the real control of things. "How many are they sending, Siuan?" Elayne gasped; plainly she had not thought of this. That showed how upset she was. Usually she caught nuances Nynaeve missed.

Siuan denied nothing. Since being stilled she could lie like a wool merchant, but when she decided to be open, she was as open as a slap in the face. "Nine. 'Enough to do honor to the Dragon Reborn'—fish guts! An embassy to a *king* is seldom more than three!—'but not enough to frighten him.' If he's learned enough to be frightened."

"You had better hope he has," Elayne said coldly. "If he hasn't, then nine may be eight too many."

Thirteen was the dangerous number. Rand was strong, perhaps as strong as any man since the Breaking, but thirteen Aes Sedai linked could overwhelm him, shield him from *saidin*, and take him prisoner. Thirteen was the number assigned when a man was gentled, though Nynaeve had begun to think the assignment more custom than requirement. Aes Sedai did a good many things because they always had.

Siuan's smile was far from pleasant. "I wonder why no one else thought of that? Think, girl! Sheriam does, and so does the Hall. Only one will go near him

at first, and no more after that than he's comfortable with. But he'll know nine came, and somebody will certainly tell him what an honor that is."

"I see," Elayne said in a small voice. "I should have known one of you would think of it. I'm sorry." That was another good thing about her. She could be stubborn as a cross-eyed mule, but when she decided she was wrong, she admitted it as nicely as any village woman. Most unusual for a noble.

"Min will be going too," Leane said. "Her . . . talents may be useful to Rand. The sisters won't know that part, of course. She can keep her secrets." As if that were the important thing.

"I see," Elayne said again, flatly this time. She made an effort to brighten her tone, a miserable failure. "Well, I see you're busy with . . . with Marigan. I did not mean to disturb you. Please, don't let me interrupt." She was gone before Nynaeve could open her mouth, the door banging shut behind her.

Angrily, Nynaeve rounded on Leane. "I thought Siuan was the mean one of you, but that was vicious!"

It was Siuan who answered. "When two women love the same man, it means trouble, and when the man is Rand al'Thor . . . the Light knows how sane he still is. Or what course they might send him off on. If there's any hair-pulling and clawing to be done, let them do it now, here."

Without thought, Nynaeve's hand found her braid and jerked it back over her shoulder. "I ought to . . ." Trouble was, there was little she could do, and nothing to make any difference. "We'll go on from where we left off when Elayne came in. But, Siuan . . . if you ever do something like that to her again," *or to me*, she thought, "I'll make you sorry you—where do you think you're going?" Siuan had scraped back her chair and risen, and after a glance, Leane did the same.

"We have work," Siuan said curtly, already heading for the door.

"You promised to make yourself available, Siuan. Sheriam told you to." Not that Sheriam thought it any less a waste of time than Siuan, but Nynaeve and Elayne had earned rewards, and a certain amount of indulgence. Like Marigan to be their maid, to give them more time for Accepted's studies.

Siuan gave her an amused look from the door. "Maybe you'll complain to her? And explain how you do your research? I want time with *Marigan* this evening; I have some more questions."

As Siuan left, Leane said sadly, "It would be nice, Nynaeve, but we have to do what we *can* do. You could try Logain." Then she was gone, too.

Nynaeve scowled. Studying Logain had taught her even less than studying the two women. She was no longer certain she could learn anything from him at

all. Anyway, the last thing she wanted was to Heal a gentled man. He made her nervous in any case.

“You bite at one another like rats in a sealed box,” Marigan said. “On the evidence, your chances are not very good. Perhaps you should consider . . . other options.”

“Hold your filthy tongue!” Nynaeve glared at her. “Hold it, the Light burn you!” Fear still oozed through the bracelet, but something else as well, something almost too feeble to exist. A faint spark of hope, perhaps. “The Light burn you,” she muttered.

The woman’s real name was not Marigan, but Moghedien. One of the Forsaken, trapped with her own overweening pride and held prisoner in the midst of Aes Sedai. Only five women in the world knew, none Aes Sedai, but keeping Moghedien secret was purest necessity. The Forsaken’s crimes made her execution as sure as the sun rising. Sivan agreed; for every Aes Sedai who counseled waiting, if any did, ten would demand immediate justice. Into an unmarked grave with her would go all her knowledge from the Age of Legends, when things undreamed of today were done with the Power. Nynaeve was not sure she believed half of what the woman told her of that Age. She certainly understood less than half.

Digging information out of Moghedien was not easy. Sometimes it was like Healing; Moghedien had never been interested in much that could not advance her, preferably by shortcuts. The woman was hardly likely to reveal the truth, but Nynaeve suspected she had been some sort of swindler or the like before swearing her soul over to the Dark One. Sometimes she and Elayne just did not know the questions to ask. Moghedien seldom volunteered anything, that was certain. Even so, they had learned a great deal, and passed most on to the Aes Sedai. As results of their researches and studies as Accepted, of course. They had gained a lot of credit.

She and Elayne would have kept knowledge of her to themselves if they could, but Birgitte had known from the start, and Sivan and Leane had to be told. Sivan had known enough of the circumstances that led to Moghedien’s capture to demand a full explanation, and had the leverage to obtain one. Nynaeve and Elayne knew some of Sivan and Leane’s secrets; they seemed to know all of her and Elayne’s except the truth about Birgitte. It made for a precarious balance, with the advantage to Sivan and Leane. Besides, bits of Moghedien’s revelations concerned supposed Darkfriend plots and hints of what the other Forsaken might be up to. The only way to pass those on was to make them seem to have come from Sivan and Leane’s agents. Nothing about the Black Ajah—hidden deep and

long denied—though that interested Siuan most. Darkfriends disgusted her, but the very idea of Aes Sedai swearing themselves to the Dark One was enough to screw Siuan’s anger to an icy rage. Moghedien claimed to have been afraid to go near *any* Aes Sedai, and that was believable enough. Fear was a permanent part of the woman. No wonder she had hidden in the shadows enough to be called the Spider. All in all, she was a treasure trove too valuable to give to the headsman, yet most Aes Sedai would not see it so. Most Aes Sedai might refuse to touch or trust anything learned from her.

Guilt and revulsion stabbed Nynaeve, not for the first time. Could any amount of knowledge justify keeping one of the Forsaken from justice? Turning her in meant punishment, probably dreadful, for everyone involved, not just herself, but Elayne and Siuan and Leane. Turning her in meant Birgitte’s secret would come out. And all that knowledge lost. Moghedien might know nothing of Healing, but she had given Nynaeve a dozen hints of what was possible, and there had to be more in her head. With those to guide her, what might she discover eventually?

Nynaeve wanted a bath, and it had nothing to do with the heat. “We will talk about the weather,” she said bitterly.

“You know more about controlling weather than I do.” Moghedien sounded weary, and an echo slid through the bracelet. There had been enough questions on the subject. “All I know is that what is happening is the Great—the Dark One’s work.” She had the nerve to smile ingratiatingly at the slip. “No mere human is strong enough to change that.”

It took effort for Nynaeve not to grind her teeth. Elayne knew more about working weather than anyone else in Salidar, and she said the same. Including the Dark One part, though any but a fool would know that, with the heat so strong when it should be coming on for snow, with no rain and the streams drying. “Then we’ll talk about using different weaves to Heal different illnesses.” The woman said that took more time than what was done now, but all the strength for it came from the Power, not from the patient and the woman channeling. Of course, she said *men* had actually been better at some kinds of Healing, and Nynaeve was not about to believe that. “You must have seen it done at least once.”

She settled down to bore away for nuggets in the dross. Some knowledge was worth a great deal. She just wished she did not feel that she was digging through slime.

* * *

Elayne did not hesitate once she was outside, only waved to Birgitte and went on. Birgitte, her golden hair in an intricate waist-long braid, was playing with two small boys while she kept watch in the narrow alley, her bow propped against a leaning fence beside her. Or trying to play with them. Jaril and Seve stared at the woman in her odd wide yellow trousers and short dark coat, but they showed no more reaction than that. They never did, and they never spoke. They were supposed to be “Marigan’s” children. Birgitte was happy playing with them, and a touch sad; she always liked playing with children, especially little boys, and she always felt that way when she did. Elayne knew it as well as she knew her own feelings.

If she had thought Moghedien had anything to do with their condition . . . but the woman claimed they were as they had been when she picked them up for her disguise in Ghealdan, orphans in the street, and some of the Yellow sisters said they had simply seen too much in the riots in Samara. Elayne could believe it from what she herself had encountered there. The Yellow sisters said time and care would help them; Elayne hoped it was so. She hoped she was not allowing the one responsible to escape justice.

She did not want to think about Moghedien now. Her mother. No, she definitely did not want to think about her. Min. And Rand. There had to be some way to handle this. Barely seeing Birgitte’s return nod, she hurried up the alley and out onto the main street of Salidar beneath a cloudless, broiling midday sky.

For years Salidar had stood abandoned, before Aes Sedai fleeing Elaida’s coup began to gather there, but now fresh thatch topped the houses, most of which showed considerable new repairs and patches, and the three large stone buildings that had been inns. One, the largest, was called the Little Tower by some; that was where the Hall met. Only what was necessary had been done, of course; cracked glass filled many windows, or none. More important matters were afoot than repointing stonework or painting. The dirt streets were filled to bursting. Not just with Aes Sedai, of course, but Accepted in banded dresses and scurrying novices in pure white, Warders moving with the deadly grace of leopards whether lean or bulky, servants who had followed Aes Sedai from the Tower, even a few children. And soldiers.

The Hall here was preparing to enforce its claims against Elaida by arms if necessary, just as soon as they chose a true Amyrlin Seat. The distant clang of hammers, cutting through the crowds’ murmur from forges outside the village, spoke of horses being shod, armor being mended. A square-faced man, his dark hair heavy with gray, went riding slowly down the street in a buff-colored coat and battered breastplate. Picking his way through the crowd, he eyed marching

clusters of men with long pikes on their shoulders, or bows. Gareth Bryne had agreed to recruit and lead the Salidar Hall's army, though Elayne wished she knew the full how and why. Something to do with Siuan and Leane, though what, she could not imagine, since he ran both women ragged, especially Siuan, fulfilling some oath Elayne did not have the straight of either. Just that Siuan complained bitterly about having to keep his room and his clothes clean on top of her other duties. She complained, but she did it; it must have been a strong oath.

Bryne's eyes passed across Elayne with barely a hesitation. He had been coolly polite and distant since she arrived in Salidar, though she had known him since her cradle. Until less than a year ago he had been Captain-General of the Queen's Guards, in Andor. Once, Elayne had thought he and her mother would marry. No, she was not going to think of her mother! Min. She had to find Min and talk.

No sooner had she begun to weave through the crowded dusty street, though, than two Aes Sedai found her. There was no choice but to stop and curtsy, while the throng streamed around them. Both women beamed. Neither sweated a drop. Pulling a handkerchief from her sleeve to dab at her face, Elayne wished she had already been taught that particular bit of Aes Sedai lore. "Good day, Anaiya Sedai, Janya Sedai."

"Good day, child. Do you have any more discoveries for us today?" As usual, Janya Frende spoke as though there was no time to get the words out. "Such remarkable strides you've made, you and Nynaeve, especially for Accepted. I still don't see how Nynaeve does it, when she has so many difficulties with the Power, but I must say I'm delighted." Unlike most Brown sisters, often absentminded beyond their books and studies, Janya Sedai was quite neat, every short dark hair tidy around the ageless face that marked Aes Sedai who had worked long with the Power. But the slender woman's appearance did hint at her Ajah. Her dress was plain gray, and stout wool—Browns seldom thought of clothes as more than decent covering—and even when she was talking to you, she wore a little frown, as though squinting in thought about something else entirely. She would have been pretty without that frown. "That way of wrapping yourself in light to become invisible. Remarkable. I'm sure someone will find how to stop the ripples, so you can move about with it. And Carena is quite excited over that little eavesdropping trick of Nynaeve's. Naughty of her, to think of that, but useful. Carena thinks she sees how to adapt it to *talk* to someone at a distance. Think of it. To talk with someone a mile away! Or two, or even—" Anaiya touched her arm, and she cut off, blinking at the other Aes Sedai.

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