

A CROWN OF SWORDS

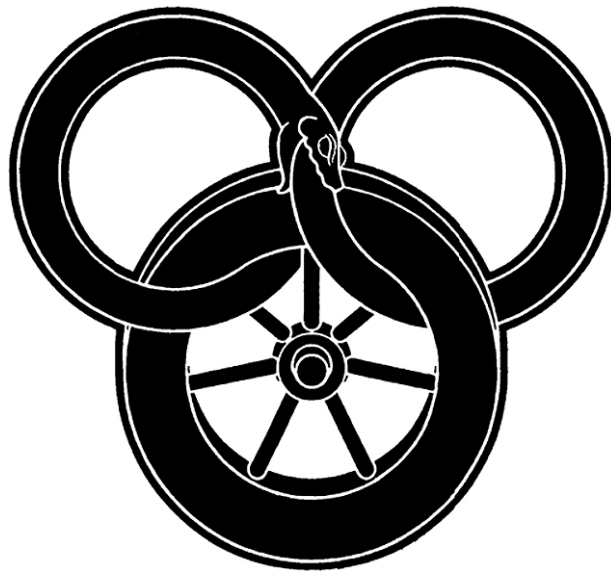
Book Seven of The Wheel of Time

Robert
Jordan

A CROWN OF SWORDS

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ROBERT JORDAN



To Harriet
Who deserves the credit
Once again

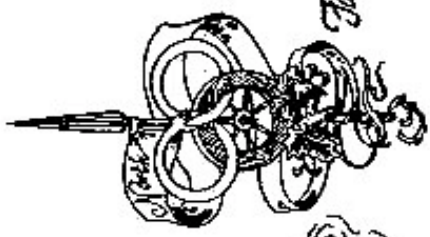
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There can be no health in us, nor any good thing grow, for the land is one with the Dragon Reborn, and he one with the land. Soul of fire, heart of stone, in pride he conquers, forcing the proud to yield. He calls upon the mountains to kneel, and the seas to give way, and the very skies to bow. Pray that the heart of stone remembers tears, and the soul of fire, love.

—From a much-disputed translation of
The Prophecies of the Dragon by the poet
Kyera Termendal of Shiota, believed to have
been published between FY 700 and FY 800



PROLOGUE



Lightnings

From the tall arched window, close onto eighty spans above the ground, not far below the top of the White Tower, Elaida could see for miles beyond Tar Valon, to the rolling plains and forests that bordered the broad River Erinin, running down from north and west before it divided around the white walls of the great island city. On the ground, long morning shadows must have been dappling the city, but from this prominence all seemed clear and bright. Not even the fabled “topless towers” of Cairhien had truly rivaled the White Tower. Certainly none of Tar Valon’s lesser towers did, for all that men spoke far and wide of them and their vaulting sky-bridges.

This high, an almost constant breeze lessened the unnatural heat gripping the world. The Feast of Lights past, snow should have covered the ground deep, yet the weather belonged in the depths of a hard summer. Another sign that the Last Battle approached and the Dark One touched the world, if more were needed. Elaida did not let the heat touch her even when she descended, of course. The breeze was not why she had had her quarters moved up here, despite the inconvenience of so many stairs, to these simple rooms.

Plain russet floor tiles and white marble walls decorated by a few tapestries could not compare with the grandeur of the Amyrlin’s study and the rooms that went with it far below. She still used those rooms occasionally—they held associations with the power of the Amyrlin Seat in some minds—but she resided here, and worked here more often than not. For the view. Not of city or river or forests, though. Of what was beginning in the Tower grounds.

Great diggings and foundations spread across what had been the Warders’ practice yard, tall wooden cranes and stacks of cut marble and granite. Masons and laborers swarmed over the workings like ants, and endless streams of wagons

trailed through the gates onto the Tower grounds, bringing more stone. To one side stood a wooden “working model,” as the masons called it, big enough for men to enter crouching on their heels and see every detail, where every stone should go. Most of the workmen could not read, after all—neither words nor mason’s drawn plans. The “working model” was as large as some manor houses.

When any king or queen had a palace, why should the Amyrlin Seat be relegated to apartments little better than those of many ordinary sisters? Her palace would match the White Tower for splendor, and have a great spire ten spans higher than the Tower itself. The blood had drained from the chief mason’s face when he heard that. The Tower had been Ogier-built, with assistance from sisters using the Power. One look at Elaida’s face, however, set Master Lerman bowing and stammering that of course all would be done as she wished. As if there had been any question.

Her mouth tightened with exasperation. She had wanted Ogier masons again, but the Ogier were confining themselves to their *stedding* for some reason. Her summons to the nearest, Stedding Jentaine, in the Black Hills, had been met with refusal. Polite, yet still refusal, without explanation, even to the Amyrlin Seat. Ogier were reclusive at best. Or they might be withdrawing from a world full of turmoil; Ogier stayed clear of human strife.

Firmly Elaida dismissed the Ogier from her mind. She prided herself on separating what could be from what could not. Ogier were a triviality. They had no part in the world beyond the cities they had built so long ago and seldom visited now except to make repairs.

The men below, crawling beetle-like over the building site, made her frown slightly. Construction went forward by inches. Ogier might be out of the question, yet perhaps the One Power could be used again. Few sisters possessed real strength in weaving Earth, but not that much was required to reinforce stone, or bind stone to stone. Yes. In her mind, the palace stood finished, colonnaded walks and great domes shining with gilt and that one spire reaching to the heavens . . . Her eyes rose to the cloudless sky, to where the spire would peak, and she let out a long sigh. Yes. The orders would be issued today.

The towering case clock in the room behind her chimed Third Rise, and in the city gongs and bells pealed the hour, the sound faint here, so high above. With a smile, Elaida left the window, smoothing her red-slashed dress of cream silk and adjusting the broad, striped stole of the Amyrlin Seat on her shoulders.

On the ornately gilded clock, small figures of gold and silver and enamel moved with the chimes. Horned and snouted Trollocs fled from a cloaked Aes Sedai on one level; on another a man representing a false Dragon tried to fend off

silver lightning bolts that had obviously been hurled by a second sister. And above the clockface, itself above her head, a crowned king and queen knelt before an Amyrlin Seat in her enameled stole, with the Flame of Tar Valon, carved from a large moonstone, atop a golden arch over her head.

She did not laugh often, but she could not help a quietly pleased chuckle at the clock. Cemaile Sorenthaine, raised from the Gray, had commissioned it dreaming of a return to the days before the Trolloc Wars, when no ruler held a throne without the Tower's approval. Cemaile's grand plans came to naught, however, as did Cemaile, and for three centuries the clock sat in a dusty storage room, an embarrassment no one dared display. Until Elaida. The Wheel of Time turned. What was once, could be again. *Would* be again.

The case clock balanced the door to her sitting room, and her bedchamber and dressing room beyond. Fine tapestries, colorful work from Tear and Kandor and Arad Doman, with thread-of-gold and thread-of-silver glittering among the merely dyed, hung each exactly opposite its mate. She had always liked order. The carpet covering most of the tiles came from Tarabon, patterned in red and green and gold; silk carpets were the most precious. In each corner of the room a marble plinth carved in unpretentious verticals held a white vase of fragile Sea Folk porcelain with two dozen carefully arranged red roses. To make roses bloom now required the One Power, especially with the drought and heat; a worthwhile use, in her opinion. Gilded carving covered both the only chair—*no* one sat in her presence now—and the writing table, but in the stark style of Cairhien. A simple room, really, with a ceiling barely two spans high, yet it would do until her palace was ready. With the view, it would.

The tall chairback held the Flame of Tar Valon picked out in moonstones above her dark head as she sat. Nothing marred the polished surface of the table except for three boxes of Altaran lacquerwork, arranged just so. Opening the box covered with golden hawks among white clouds, she removed a slim strip of thin paper from atop the pile of reports and correspondence inside.

For what must have been the hundredth time, she read the message come from Cairhien by pigeon twelve days ago. Few in the Tower knew of its existence. None but she knew its contents, or would have a glimmer of what it meant if they did. The thought almost made her laugh again.

The ring has been placed in the bull's nose. I expect a pleasant journey to market.

No signature, yet she needed none. Only Galina Casban had known to send that glorious message. Galina, whom Elaida trusted to do what she would have trusted to no one else save herself; Not that she trusted anyone fully, but the head of the Red Ajah more than any other. She herself had been raised from the Red, after all, and in many ways still thought of herself as Red.

The ring has been placed in the bull's nose.

Rand al'Thor—the Dragon Reborn, the man who had seemed on the point of swallowing the world, the man who had swallowed entirely too much of it—Rand al'Thor was shielded and in Galina's control. And none who might support him knew. Even a chance of that, and the wording would have been different. By various earlier messages, it seemed he had rediscovered how to Travel, a Talent lost to Aes Sedai since the Breaking, yet that had not saved him. It had even played into Galina's hands. Apparently he had a habit of coming and going without warning. Who would suspect that this time he had not gone, but been taken? Something very like a giggle rose in her.

Inside another week, two at most, al'Thor would be in the Tower, closely supervised and guided safely until Tarmon Gai'don, his ravaging of the world stopped. It was madness to allow any man who could channel to run free, but most of all the man prophecy said must face the Dark One in the Last Battle, the Light send that it lay years off yet in spite of the weather. Years would be needed to arrange the world properly, beginning with undoing what al'Thor had done.

Of course, the damage he had wrought was nothing beside what he could have caused, free. Not to mention the possibility that he might have gotten himself killed before he was needed. Well, that troublesome young man would be wrapped in swaddling and kept safe as an infant in his mother's arms until time to take him to Shayol Ghul. After that, if he survived . . .

Elaida's lips pursed. The Prophecies of the Dragon seemed to say he would not, which undeniably would be for the best.

"Mother?" Elaida almost gave a start as Alviarin spoke. Entering without so much as a knock! "I have word from the Ajahs, Mother." Slim and cool-faced, Alviarin wore the Keeper's narrow stole in white, matching her dress, to show she had been raised from the White, but in her mouth 'Mother' became less a title of respect and more an address to an equal.

Alviarin's presence was enough to dent Elaida's good mood. That the Keeper of Chronicles came from the White, not the Red, always served as a

biting reminder of her weakness when she was first raised. Some of that had been dispelled, true, but not all. Not yet. She was tired of regretting that she had so few personal eyes-and-ears outside Andor. And that her predecessor and Alviarin's had escaped—been helped to escape; they must have had help!—escaped before the keys to the Amyrlin's great network could be wrested out of them.

She more than wanted the network that was hers by right. By strong tradition the Ajahs sent to the Keeper whatever dribbles from their own eyes-and-ears they were willing to share with the Amyrlin, but Elaida was convinced the woman kept back some of even that trickle. Yet she could not ask the Ajahs for information directly. Bad enough to be weak without going begging to the world. The Tower, anyway, which was as much of the world as really counted.

Elaida kept her own face every bit as cool as the other woman's, acknowledging her only with a nod while she pretended to examine papers from the lacquered box. Slowly she turned them over one by one, returned them to the box slowly. Without really seeing a word. Making Alviarin wait was bitter, because it was petty, and petty ways were all she had to strike at one who should have been her servant.

An Amyrlin could issue any decree she wished, her word law and absolute. Yet as a practical matter, without support from the Hall of the Tower, many of those decrees were wasted ink and paper. No sister would disobey an Amyrlin, not directly at least, yet many decrees required a hundred other things ordered to implement them. In the best of times that could come slowly, on occasion so slowly it never happened, and these were far from the best.

Alviarin stood there, calm as a frozen pond. Closing the Altaran box, Elaida kept out the strip of paper that announced her sure victory. Unconsciously she fingered it, a talisman. "Has Teslyn or Joline finally deigned to send more than word of their safe arrival?"

That was meant to remind Alviarin that no one could consider herself immune. Nobody cared what happened in Ebou Dar, Elaida least of all; the capital of Altara could fall into the sea, and except for the merchants, not even the rest of Altara would notice. But Teslyn had sat in the Hall nearly fifteen years before Elaida had commanded her to resign her chair. If Elaida could send a Sitter—a *Red Sitter*—who had supported her rise off as ambassador to a flyspeck throne with no one sure why but a hundred rumors flowering, then she could come down on anyone. Joline was a different matter. She had held her chair for the Green only a matter of weeks, and everyone was sure the Greens had selected her to show they would not be cowed by the new Amyrlin, who had handed her a

fearsome penance. That bit of insolence could not be allowed to pass, of course, and had not been. Everyone knew that, too.

It was meant to remind Alviarin that she was vulnerable, but the slim woman merely smiled her cool smile. So long as the Hall remained as it was, she *was* immune. She riffled through the papers in her hand, plucking one out. “No word from Teslyn or Joline, Mother, no, though with the news you have received so far from the thrones . . .” That smile deepened into something dangerously close to amusement. “They all mean to try their wings, to see if you are as strong as . . . as your predecessor.” Even Alviarin had enough sense not to speak the Sanche woman’s name in her presence. It was true, though; every king and queen, even mere nobles, seemed to be testing the limits of her power. She must make examples.

Glancing at the paper, Alviarin went on. “There is word from Ebou Dar, however. Through the Gray.” Had she emphasized that, to drive the splinter deeper? “It appears Elayne Trakand and Nynaeve al’Meara are there. Posing as full sisters, with the blessings of the rebel . . . *embassy* . . . to Queen Tylin. There are two others, not identified, who may be doing the same. The lists of who is with the rebels are incomplete. Or they may just be companions. The Grays are uncertain.”

“Why under the Light would they be in Ebou Dar?” Elaida said dismissively. Certainly Teslyn would have sent news of *that*. “The Gray must be passing along rumors, now. Tarna’s message said they are with the rebels in Salidar.” Tarna Feir had reported Siuan Sanche there, too. And Logain Ablar, spreading those vicious lies no Red sister could lower herself to acknowledge, much less deny. The Sanche woman had a hand in that obscenity, or the sun would rise in the west tomorrow. Why could she not simply have crawled away and died, decently out of sight, like other stilled women?

It required effort not to draw a deep breath. Logain could be hanged quietly as soon as the rebels were dealt with; most of the world thought him dead long since. The filthy slander that the Red Ajah had set him up as a false Dragon would die with him. When the rebels were dealt with, the Sanche woman could be made to hand over the keys to the Amyrlin’s eyes-and-ears. And name the traitors who had helped her escape, A foolish hope to wish that Alviarin would be named among them. “I can hardly see the al’Meara girl running to Ebou Dar claiming to be Aes Sedai, much less Elayne, can you?”

“You did order Elayne found, Mother. As important as putting a leash on al’Thor, you said. When she was among three hundred rebels in Salidar, it was

impossible to do anything, but she will not be so well protected in the Tarasin Palace.”

“I have no time for gossip and rumors.” Elaida bit off each word with contempt. Did Alviarin know more than she should, mentioning al’Thor, and leashing? “I suggest you read Tarna’s report again, then ask yourself whether even *rebels* would allow Accepted to pretend to the shawl.”

Alviarin waited with visible patience for her to finish, then examined her sheaf again and pulled out four more sheets. “The Gray agent sent sketches,” she said blandly, proffering the pages. “He is no artist, but Elayne and Nynaeve are recognizable.” After a moment, when Elaida did not take the drawings, she slipped them under the rest.

Elaida felt the color of anger and embarrassment rising in her cheeks. Alviarin had led her down this path deliberately by not bringing out those sketches at the first. She ignored that—anything else would only be more embarrassing still—but her voice became cold. “I want them taken, and brought to me.”

The lack of curiosity on Alviarin’s face made Elaida wonder again how much the woman knew that she was not supposed to. The al’Meara girl might well provide a handle on al’Thor, coming from the same village. All the sisters knew that, just as they knew that Elayne was Daughter-Heir of Andor, and that her mother was dead. Vague rumors linking Morgase to the Whitecloaks were so much nonsense, for she would never have gone to the Children of the Light for help. She was dead, leaving not even a corpse behind, and Elayne would be Queen. If she could be wrested away from the rebels before the Andoran Houses put Dyelin on the Lion Throne instead. It was not widely known what made Elayne more important than any other noble with a strong claim to a throne. Aside from the fact that she would be Aes Sedai one day, of course.

Elaida had the Foretelling sometimes, a Talent many thought lost before her, and long ago she had Foretold that the Royal House of Andor held the key to winning the Last Battle. Twenty-five years gone and more, as soon as it became clear that Morgase Trakand would gain the throne in the Succession, Elaida had fastened herself to the girl, as she was then. How Elayne was crucial, Elaida did not know, but Foretelling never lied. Sometimes she almost hated the Talent. She hated things she could not control.

“I want all four of them, Alviarin.” The other two were unimportant, certainly, but she would take no chances. “Send my command to Teslyn immediately. Tell her—and Joline—that if they fail to send regular reports from now on, they will wish they had never been born. Include the information from

the Macura woman.” Her mouth twisted around that last.

The name made Alviarin shift uneasily, too, and no wonder. Ronde Macura’s nasty little infusion was something to make any sister uncomfortable. Forkroot was not lethal—at least you woke, if you drank enough to sleep—but a tea that deadened a woman’s ability to channel seemed aimed too directly at Aes Sedai. A pity the information had not been received before Galina went; if forkroot worked on men as well as it seemed to on women, it would have made her task considerably easier.

Alviarin’s ill ease lasted only a moment; a mere instant and she was all self-possession again, unyielding as a wall of ice. “As you wish, Mother. I am sure they will leap to obey, as of course they should.”

A sudden flash of irritation swept Elaida like fire in dry pasture. The fate of the world in her hands, and petty stumbling blocks kept rising beneath her feet. Bad enough that she had rebels and recalcitrant rulers to handle, but too many Sitters still brooded and grumbled behind her back, fertile ground for the other woman to plow. Only six were firmly under her own thumb, and she suspected as many at least listened closely to Alviarin before they voted. Certainly nothing of importance passed through the Hall unless Alviarin agreed to it. Not open agreement, not with any acknowledgment that Alviarin bore a shred more influence or power than a Keeper should, but if Alviarin opposed . . . At least they had not gone so far as to reject anything Elaida sent them. They simply dragged their feet and too often let what she wanted starve on the floor. A pitifully small thing for which to be happy. Some Amyrlins had become little more than puppets once the Hall acquired a taste for rejecting what they put forward.

Her hands clenched, and a tiny crackle came from the strip of paper.

The ring has been placed in the bull’s nose.

Alviarin looked as composed as a marble statue, but Elaida no longer cared. The shepherd was on his way to her. The rebels would be crushed and the Hall cowed, Alviarin forced to her knees and every fractious ruler brought to heel, from Tenobia of Saldaea, who had gone into hiding to avoid her emissary, to Mattin Stepaneos of Illian, who was trying to play all sides at once again, trying to agree with her *and* the Whitecloaks, and with al’Thor for all she knew. Elayne would be placed on the throne in Caemlyn, without her brother to get in the way and with a full knowledge of who had set her there. A little time back in the

Tower would make the girl damp clay in Elaida's hands.

"I want *those men* rooted out, Alviarin." There was no need to say who she meant; half the Tower could talk of nothing but *those men* in their *Black Tower*, and the other half whispered about them in corners.

"There are disturbing reports, Mother." Alviarin looked through her papers once more, but Elaida thought it was only for something to do. She did not pluck out any more pages, and if nothing else disturbed the woman for long, this unholy midden outside Caemlyn must.

"*More* rumors? Do you believe the tales of thousands flocking to Caemlyn in answer to that obscene *amnesty*?" Not the least of what al'Thor had done, but hardly cause for worry. Just a pile of filth that must be safely cleared before Elayne was crowned in Caemlyn.

"Of course not, Mother, but—"

"Toveine is to lead; this task belongs properly to the Red." Toveine Gazal had been fifteen years away from the Tower, until Elaida summoned her back. The other two Red Sitters who had resigned and gone into a "voluntary" retreat at the same time were nervous-eyed women now, but unlike Lirene and Tsutama, Toveine had only hardened in her solitary exile. "She is to have fifty sisters." There could not be more than two or three men at this *Black Tower* actually able to channel, Elaida was certain. Fifty sisters could overwhelm them easily. Yet there might be others to deal with. Hangers-on, camp followers, fools full of futile hopes and insane ambitions. "And she is to take a hundred—no, two hundred—of the Guard."

"Are you certain that is wise? The rumors of thousands are certainly madness, but a Green agent in Caemlyn claims there are over four hundred in this Black Tower, A clever fellow. It seems he counted the supply carts that go out from the city. And you are aware of the rumors Mazrim Taim is with them."

Elaida fought to keep her features smooth, and barely succeeded. She had forbidden mention of Taim's name, and it was bitter that she did not dare—did not dare!—impose the penalty on Alviarin. The woman looked her straight in the eyes; the absence of so much as a perfunctory "Mother" this time was marked. And the *temerity* of asking whether her actions were wise! She was the Amyrlin Seat! Not first among equals; the Amyrlin Seat!

Opening the largest of the lacquered boxes revealed carved ivory miniatures laid out on gray velvet. Often just handling her collection soothed her, but more, like the knitting she enjoyed, it let whoever was attending her know their place, if she seemed to give more attention to the miniatures than to what they had to say. Fingering first an exquisite cat, sleek and flowing, then an

elaborately robed woman with a peculiar little animal, some fantasy of the carver, almost like a man covered in hair, crouched on her shoulder, at length Elaida chose out a curving fish, so delicately carved that it seemed nearly real despite the aged yellow of the ivory.

“Four hundred rabble, Alviarin.” She felt calmer already, for Alviarin’s mouth had thinned. Just a fraction, but she savored any crack in the woman’s façade. “If there are that many. Only a fool could believe that more than one or two can channel. At most! In ten years, we have found only six men with the ability. Just twenty-four in the last twenty years. And you know how the land has been scoured. As for Taim . . .” The name burned her mouth; the only false Dragon ever to escape being gentled once in the hands of Aes Sedai. Not a thing she wanted in the Chronicles under her reign, certainly not until she decided how it should be recorded. At present the Chronicles told nothing after his capture.

She stroked her thumb along the fish’s scales. “He is dead, Alviarin, else we would have heard from him long since. And not serving al’Thor. Can you think he went from claiming to be the Dragon Reborn to *servi*ng the Dragon Reborn? Can you think he could be in Caemlyn without Davram Bashere at least trying to kill him?” Her thumb moved faster on the ivory fish as she reminded herself that the Marshal-General of Saldaea was in Caemlyn taking orders from al’Thor. What *was* Tenobia playing at? Elaida held it all inside, though, presenting a face as calm as one of her carvings.

“Twenty-four is a dangerous number to speak aloud,” Alviarin said with an ominous quiet, “as dangerous as two thousand. The Chronicles record only sixteen. The last thing needed now is for those years to rear up again. Or for sisters who know only what they were told to learn the truth. Even those you brought back hold their silence.”

Elaida put on a bemused look. So far as she knew, Alviarin had learned the truth of those years only on being raised Keeper, but her own knowledge was more personal. Not that Alviarin could be aware of that. Not for certain, anyway. “Daughter, whatever comes out, I have no fear. Who is going to impose a penance on *me*, and on what charge?” That skirted truth nicely, but apparently it impressed the other woman not at all.

“The Chronicles record a number of Amyrlins who took on public penance for some usually obscure reason, but it has always seemed to me that is how an Amyrlin might have it written if she found herself with no choice except—”

Elaida’s hand slapped down on the table. “Enough, daughter! I *am* Tower law! What has been hidden will remain hidden, for the same reason it has for twenty years—the good of the White Tower.” Only then did she feel the bruise

beginning on her palm; she lifted her hand to reveal the fish, broken in two. How old had it been? Five hundred years? A thousand? It was all she could do not to quiver with rage. Her voice certainly thickened with it. "Toveine is to lead fifty sisters and two hundred of the Tower Guards to Caemlyn, to this Black Tower, where they will gentle any man they find able to channel and hang him, along with as many others as they can take alive." Alviarin did not even blink at the violation of Tower law. Elaida had spoken the truth as she meant it to be; with this, with everything, she *was* Tower law. "For that matter, hang up the dead as well. Let them be a warning to any man who thinks of touching the True Source. Have Toveine attend me. I will want to hear her plan."

"It will be as you command, Mother." The woman's reply was as cool and smooth as her face. "Though if I may suggest, you might wish to reconsider sending so many sisters away from the Tower. Apparently the rebels found your offer wanting. They are no longer in Salidar. They are on the march. The reports come from Altara, but they must be into Murandy by now. And they have chosen themselves an Amyrlin." She scanned the top sheet of her sheaf of papers as if searching for the name. "Egwene al'Vere, it seems."

That Alviarin had left this, the most important piece of news, until now, should have made Elaida explode in fury. Instead, she threw back her head and laughed. Only a firm hold on dignity kept her from drumming her heels on the floor. The surprise on Alviarin's face made her laugh harder, till she had to wipe her eyes with her fingers.

"You do not see it," she said when she could speak between ripples of mirth. "As well you are Keeper, Alviarin, not a Sitter. In the Hall, blind as you are, within a month the others would be holding you in a cabinet and taking you out when they needed your vote."

"I see enough, Mother." Alviarin's voice held no heat; if anything, it should have coated the walls with frost. "I see three hundred rebel Aes Sedai, perhaps more, marching on Tar Valon with an army led by Gareth Bryne, acknowledged a great captain. Discounting the more ridiculous reports, that army may number over twenty thousand, and with Bryne to lead they will gain more at every village and town they pass. I do not say they have hope of taking the city, of course, but it is hardly a matter for laughter. High Captain Chubain should be ordered to increase recruiting for the Tower Guard."

Elaida's gaze fell sourly on the broken fish, and she stood and stalked to the nearest window, her back to Alviarin. The palace under construction took away the bitter taste, that and the slip of paper she still clutched.

She smiled down on her palace-to-be. "Three hundred rebels, yes, but you

should read Tarna's account again. At least a hundred are on the point of breaking already." She trusted Tarna to some extent, a Red with no room in her head for nonsense, and she said the rebels were ready to jump at shadows. Quietly desperate sheep looking for a shepherd, she said. A wilder, of course, yet still sensible. Tarna should be back soon, and able to give a fuller report. Not that it was needed. Elaida's plans were already working among the rebels. But that was her secret.

"Tarna has always been sure she could make people do what it was clear they would not." Had there been an emphasis in that, a significance of tone? Elaida decided to ignore it. She had to ignore too much from Alviarin, but the day would come. Soon.

"As for their army, daughter, she says two or three thousand men at most. If they had more, they would have made sure she saw them, to overawe us." In Elaida's opinion, eyes-and-ears always exaggerated, to make their information seem more valuable. Only sisters could be truly trusted. Red sisters, anyway. Some of them. "But I would not care if they did have twenty thousand, or fifty, or a hundred. Can you even begin to guess why?" When she turned, Alviarin's face was all smooth composure, a mask over blind ignorance. "You seem to be conversant with all the aspects of Tower law. What penalty do rebels face?"

"For the leaders," Alviarin said slowly, "stilling." She frowned slightly, skirts swaying just barely as her feet shifted. Good. Even Accepted knew this, and she could not understand why Elaida asked. Very good. "For many of the rest, too."

"Perhaps." The leaders might themselves escape that, most of them, if they submitted properly. The minimum penalty in law was to be birched in the Grand Hall before the assembled sisters, followed by at least a year and a day in public penance. Yet nothing said the penance must be served all at once; a month here, a month there, and they would still be atoning their crimes ten years from now, constant reminders of what came of resisting her. Some would be stilled, of course—Sheriam, a few of the more prominent so-called Sitters—but only sufficient to make the rest fear putting a foot wrong again; not enough to weaken the Tower. The White Tower had to be whole, and it had to be strong. Strong, and firmly in her grasp.

"Only one crime among those they have committed *demands* stilling." Alviarin opened her mouth. There had been ancient rebellions, buried so deep that few among the sisters knew; the Chronicles stood mute, the lists of stilled and executed confined to records open only to Amyrlin, Keeper and Sitters, aside from the few librarians who kept them. Elaida allowed Alviarin no opportunity to

speak. “Any woman who falsely claims the title of Amyrlin Seat *must* be stilled. If they believed they had any chance of success, Sheriam would be their *Amyrlin*, or Lelaine, or Carlinya, or one of the others.” Tarna reported that Romanda Cassin had come out of her retirement; Romanda surely would have seized the stole with both hands if she saw the tenth part of a chance. “Instead, they have plucked out an *Accepted*.”

Elaida shook her head in wry amusement. She could quote every word of the law setting out how a woman was chosen Amyrlin—she had made good use of it herself, after all—and never once did it require that the woman be a full sister. Obviously she *must* be, so those who framed the law never stated it, and the rebels had squirmed through that crack. “They know their cause is hopeless, Alviarin. They plan to strut and bluster, try to dig out some protection against penalty for themselves, then yield the girl as a sacrifice.” Which was a pity. The al’Vere girl was another possible handle on al’Thor, and when she reached her full strength in the One Power, she would have been one of the strongest in a thousand years or more. A true pity.

“Gareth Bryne and an army hardly sound like strutting to me. It will take their army five or six months to reach Tar Valon. In that time, High Captain Chubain could increase the Guard—”

“Their *army*,” Elaida sneered. Alviarin was such a fool; for all her cool exterior, she was a rabbit. Next she would be spouting the Sanche woman’s nonsense about the Forsaken being loose. Of course, she did not know the secret, but just the same . . . “Farmers carrying pikes, butchers with bows and tailors on horseback! And every step of the way, thinking of the Shining Walls, that held Artur Hawkwing at bay.” No, not a rabbit. A weasel. Yet soon or late, she would be weasel-fur trim on Elaida’s cloak. The Light send it soon. “Every step of the way, they will lose a man, if not ten. I would not be surprised if our rebels appear with nothing more than their Warders.” Too many people knew of the division in the Tower. Once the rebellion was broken, of course, it could be made to seem all a ploy, a part of gaining control of young al’Thor perhaps. An effort of years, that, and generations before memories faded. Every last rebel would pay for that on her knees.

Elaida clenched her fist as though she held all the rebels by the throat. Or Alviarin. “I mean to break them, daughter. They will split open like a rotten melon.” Her secret assured that, however many farmers and tailors Lord Bryne hung on to, but let the other woman think as she would. Suddenly the Foretelling took hold of her, a certainty about things she could not see stronger than if they had been laid out before her. She would have been willing to step blindly over a

cliff on that certainty. “The White Tower will be whole again, except for remnants cast out and scorned, whole and stronger than ever. Rand al’Thor will face the Amyrlin Seat and know her anger. The Black Tower will be rent in blood and fire, and sisters will walk its grounds. This I Foretell.”

As usual, the Foretelling left her trembling, gasping for breath. She forced herself to stand still and straight, to breathe slowly; she never let anyone see weakness. But Alviarin . . . Her eyes were wide as they could open, lips parted as if she had forgotten the words she meant to speak. A paper slid from the sheaf in her hands and almost fell before she could catch it. That recalled her to herself. In a flash she regained her serene mask, a perfect picture of Aes Sedai calm, but she definitely had been jolted to her heels. Oh, very good. Let her chew on the certain surety of Elaida’s victory. Chew and break her teeth.

Elaida drew a deep breath and seated herself behind her writing table again, putting the broken ivory fish to one side where she did not have to look at it. It was time to exploit her victory. “There is work to be done today, daughter. The first message is to go to the Lady Caraline Damodred . . . ”

Elaida spun out her plans, enlarging on what Alviarin knew, revealing some that she did not, because at the last an Amyrlin did have to work through her Keeper, however much she hated the woman. There was a pleasure in watching Alviarin’s eyes, watching her wonder what else she still did not know. But while Elaida ordered, divided and assigned the world between the Aryth Ocean and the Spine of the World, in her mind frolicked the image of young al’Thor on his way to her like a caged bear, to be taught to dance for his dinner.

The Chronicles could hardly record the years of the Last Battle without mentioning the Dragon Reborn, but she knew that one name would be written larger than all others. Elaida do Avriny a’Roihan, youngest daughter of a minor House in the north of Murandy, would go down in history as the greatest and most powerful Amyrlin Seat of all time. The most powerful woman in the history of the world. The woman who saved humankind.

The Aiel standing in a deep fold in the low, brown-grass hills seemed carved figures, ignoring sheets of dust sweeping ahead of a gusting wind. That snow should have been deep on the ground this time of year did not bother them; none had ever seen snow, and this oven heat, with the sun still well short of its peak, was less than where they came from. Their attention remained fixed on the southern rise, waiting for the signal that would announce the arrival of the destiny of the Shaido Aiel.

Outwardly, Sevanna looked like the others, though a ring of Maidens marked her out, resting easily on their heels, dark veils already hiding their faces to the eyes. She also waited, and more impatiently than she let on, but not to the exclusion of everything else. That was one reason why she commanded and the rest followed. The second was that she saw what could be if you refused to let outworn custom and stale tradition tie your hands.

A slight flicker of her green eyes to the left showed twelve men and one woman, each with round bull-hide buckler and three or four short spears, garbed in gray-and-brown *cadin'sor* that blended as well with the terrain here as in the Three-fold Land. Efallin, short graying hair hidden by the *shoufa* wrapped around her head, sometimes glanced Sevanna's way; if a Maiden of the Spear could be said to be uneasy, Efallin was. Some Shaido Maidens had gone south, joining the fools capering around Rand al'Thor, and Sevanna did not doubt others talked of it. Efallin must be wondering whether providing Sevanna with an escort of Maidens, as if she had been *Far Dareis Mai* once herself, was enough to balance that. At least Efallin had no doubts where true power lay.

Like Efallin, the men led Shaido warrior societies, and they eyed one another between watching the rise. Especially blocky Maeric, who was *Seia Doon*, and scar-faced Bendhuin, of *Far Aldazar Din*. After today, no longer would anything hold back the Shaido from sending a man to Rhuidean, to be marked as the clan chief if he survived. Until that happened, Sevanna spoke as the clan chief since she was the widow of the last chief. Of the last two chiefs. And let those who muttered that she carried bad luck choke on it.

Gold and ivory bracelets clattered softly as she straightened the dark shawl over her arms and adjusted her necklaces. Most of those were gold and ivory too, but one was a mass of pearls and rubies that had belonged to a wetlander noblewoman—the woman now wore white and hauled and fetched alongside the other *gai'shain* back in the mountains called Kinslayer's Dagger—with a ruby the size of a small hen's egg nestled between her breasts. The wetlands held rich prizes. A large emerald on her finger caught sunlight in green fire; finger rings were one wetlander custom worth adopting, no matter the stares often aimed at hers. She would have more, if they matched this one for magnificence.

Most of the men thought Maeric or Bendhuin would be first to receive the Wise Ones' permission to try Rhuidean. Only Efallin in that group suspected that none would, and she only suspected; she also was astute enough to voice her suspicions circumspectly to Sevanna and not at all to anyone else. Their minds could not encompass the possibility of shedding the old, and in truth, if Sevanna was impatient to don the new, she was also aware that she must bring them to it

slowly. Much had changed already in the old ways since the Shaido crossed the Dragonwall into the wetlands—still wet, compared to the Three-fold Land—yet more would change. Once Rand al'Thor was in her hands, once she had wed the *Car'a'carn*, the chief of chiefs of all the Aiel—this nonsense of the Dragon Reborn was wetlander foolishness—there would be a new way of naming clan chiefs, and sept chiefs as well. Perhaps even the heads of the warrior societies. Rand al'Thor would name them. Pointing where she told him, of course. And that would be only the beginning. The wetlander notion of handing down rank to your children, and their children, for instance.

The wind swept higher for a moment, blowing south. It would cover the sound of the wetlanders' horses and wagons.

She shifted her shawl again, then suppressed a grimace. At all costs she must not appear nervous. A glance to the right stilled worry as soon as begun. Over two hundred Shaido Wise Ones clustered there, and normally at least some would be watching her like vultures, but their eyes were all on the rise. More than one adjusted her shawl uneasily or smoothed bulky skirts. Sevanna's lip curled. Sweat beaded on some of those faces. Sweat! Where was their honor that they showed nerves before every gaze?

Everyone stiffened slightly as a young *Sovin Nai* appeared above them, lowering his veil as he scrambled down. He came straight to her, as was proper, but to her irritation he raised his voice enough for all to hear. "One of their forward scouts escaped. He was wounded, but still on his horse."

The society leaders began to move before he finished speaking. That would never do. They would lead in the actual fighting—Sevanna had never more than held a spear in her life—but she would not let them forget for a moment who she was. "Throw every last spear against them," she ordered loudly, "before they can ready themselves." They rounded on her as one.

"Every spear?" Bendhuin demanded incredulously. "You mean except for the screens—"

Glowering, Maeric spoke right on top of him. "If we keep no reserve, we can be—"

Sevanna cut them both off. "Every spear! These are Aes Sedai we dance with. We must overwhelm them immediately!" Efallin and most of the others schooled their faces to stillness, but Bendhuin and Maeric frowned, ready to argue. Fools. They faced a few dozen Aes Sedai, a few hundred wetlander soldiers, yet with the more than forty thousand *algai'd'siswai* they had insisted on, they still wanted their screens of scouts and their spears in reserve as if they faced other Aiel or a wetlander army. "I speak as the clan chief of the Shaido."

She should not have to say that, but a reminder could do no harm. “They are a handful.” She weighted every word with contempt now. “They can be run down if the spears move quickly. You were ready to avenge Desaine this sunrise. Do I smell fear now? Fear of a few wetlanders? Has honor gone from the Shaido?”

That turned their faces to stone, as intended. Even Efallin showed eyes like polished gray gems as she veiled; her fingers moved in Maiden handtalk, and as the society leaders sprinted up the rise, the Maidens around Sevanna followed. *That* was not what she had intended, but at least the spears were moving. Even from the bottom of the fold she could see what had seemed bare ground disgorging *cadin’sor*-clad figures, all hurrying south with the long strides that could run down horses. There was no time to waste. With a thought to have words with Efallin later, Sevanna turned to the Wise Ones.

Chosen from the strongest of the Shaido Wise Ones who could wield the One Power, they were six or seven for every Aes Sedai around Rand al’Thor, yet Sevanna saw doubt. They tried to hide it behind stony faces, but it was there, in shifting eyes, in tongues wetting lips. Many traditions fell today, traditions old and strong as law. Wise Ones did not take part in battles. Wise Ones kept far from Aes Sedai. They knew the ancient tales, that the Aiel had been sent to the Three-fold Land for failing the Aes Sedai, that they would be destroyed if ever they failed them again. They had heard the stories, what Rand al’Thor had claimed before all, that as part of their service to the Aes Sedai, the Aiel had sworn to do no violence.

Once Sevanna had been sure those stories were lies, but of late she believed the Wise Ones knew them for truth. None had told her so, of course. It did not matter. She herself had never made the two journeys to Rhuidean required to become a Wise One, but the others had accepted her, however reluctant some had been. Now they had no choice but to go on accepting. Useless traditions would be carved into new.

“Aes Sedai,” she said softly. They leaned toward her in a muted clatter of bracelets and necklaces, to catch her low words. “They hold Rand al’Thor, the *Car’a’carn*. We must take him from them.” There were scattered frowns. Most believed she wanted the *Car’a’carn* taken alive in order to avenge the death of Couladin, her second husband. They understood that, but they would not have come here for it. “Aes Sedai,” she hissed angrily. “We kept our pledge, but they broke theirs. We violated nothing, but they have violated everything. You know how Desaine was murdered.” And of course they did. The eyes watching her were suddenly sharper. Killing a Wise One ranked with killing a pregnant woman, a child or a blacksmith. Some of those eyes were *very* sharp. Therava’s,

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