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CROSSROADS OF TWILIGHT

Sequel
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Winter's
Heart*

"Robert Jordan has come to dominate
the world Tolkien began to reveal."

—*The New York Times*

The cover features a detailed illustration of three riders on horseback in a forest. On the left, a man in a purple tunic and brown boots sits on a white horse, gesturing with his right hand. In the center, a man in a green tunic and a wide-brimmed hat sits on a brown horse, holding a long spear. On the right, a man in dark clothing sits on a brown horse, aiming a bow. The background shows a dense forest with tall trees and a path leading into the distance.

Robert
Jordan

Book Ten
of
THE WHEEL
OF TIME™

CROSSROADS OF TWILIGHT

Book Ten of The Wheel of Time

ROBERT JORDAN



For Harriet
Then, now, and always

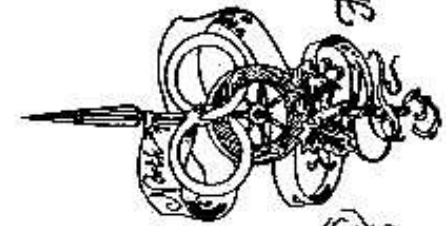
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And it shall come to pass, in the days when the Dark Hunt rides, when the right hand falters and the left hand strays, that mankind shall come to the Crossroads of Twilight and all that is, all that was, and all that will be shall balance on the point of a sword, while the winds of the Shadow grow.

—from *The Prophecies of the Dragon*,
translation believed done by Jain
Charin, known as Jain Farstrider,
shortly before his disappearance



PROLOGUE



Glimmers of the Pattern

Rodel Ituralde hated waiting, though he well knew it was the largest part of being a soldier. Waiting for the next battle, for the enemy to move, to make a mistake. He watched the winter forest and was as still as the trees. The sun stood halfway to its peak, and gave no warmth. His breath misted white in front of his face, frosting his neatly trimmed mustache and the black fox fur lining his hood. He was glad that his helmet hung at his pommel. His breastplate held the cold and radiated it through his coat and all the layers of wool, silk and linen beneath. Even Dart's saddle felt cold, as though the white gelding were made of frozen milk. The helmet would have addled his brain.

Winter had come late to Arad Doman, very late, but with a vengeance. From summer heat that lingered unnaturally into fall, to winter's heart in less than a month. The leaves that had survived the long summer's drought had been frozen before they could change color, and now they glistened like strange, ice-covered emeralds in the morning sun. The horses of the twenty-odd armsmen around him occasionally stamped a hoof in the knee-deep snow. It had been a long ride this far, and they had farther to go whether this day turned out good or ill. Dark clouds roiled the sky to northward. He did not need his weather-wise there to tell him the temperature would plummet before nightfall. They had to be under shelter by then.

"Not as rough as winter before last, is it, my Lord?" Jaalam said quietly. The tall young officer had a way of reading Ituralde's mind, and his voice was pitched for the others to hear. "Even so, I suppose some men would be dreaming of mulled wine about now. Not this lot, of course. Remarkably abstemious. They all drink tea, I believe. Cold tea. If they had a few birch switches, they'd be stripping down for snow baths."

"They'll have to keep their clothes on for the time being," Ituralde replied

dryly, “but they might get some cold tea tonight, if they’re lucky.” That brought a few chuckles. Quiet chuckles. He had chosen these men with care, and they knew about noise at the wrong time.

He himself could have done with a steaming cup of spiced wine, or even tea. But it was a long time since merchants had brought tea to Arad Doman. A long time since any outland merchant had ventured farther than the border with Saldaea. By the time news of the outside world reached him, it was as stale as last month’s bread, if it was more than rumor to begin. That hardly mattered, though. If the White Tower truly was divided against itself, or men who could channel really were being called to Caemlyn . . . well, the world would have to do without Rodel Ituralde until Arad Doman was whole again. For the moment, Arad Doman was more than enough for any sane man to go on with.

Once again he reviewed the orders he had sent, carried by the fastest riders he had, to every noble loyal to the King. Divided as they were by bad blood and old feuds, they still shared that much. They would gather their armies and ride when orders came from the Wolf; at least, so long as he held the King’s favor. They would even hide in the mountains and wait, at his order. Oh, they would chafe, and some would curse his name, but they would obey. They knew the Wolf won battles. More, they knew he won wars. The Little Wolf, they called him when they thought he could not hear, but he did not care whether they drew attention to his stature—well, not much—so long as they rode when and where he said. Very soon they would be riding hard, moving to set a trap that would not spring for months. It was a long chance he was taking. Complex plans had many ways to fall apart, and this plan had layers inside layers. Everything would be ruined before it began if he failed to provide the bait. Or if someone ignored his order to evade couriers from the King. They all knew his reasons, though, and even the most stiff-necked shared them, though few were willing to speak of the matter aloud. He himself had moved like a wraith racing on a storm since he received Alsalam’s latest command. In his sleeve where the folded paper lay tucked above the pale lace that fell onto his steel-backed gauntlet. They had one last chance, one very small chance, to save Arad Doman. Perhaps even to save Alsalam from himself before the Council of Merchants decided to put another man on the throne in his place. He had been a good ruler, for over twenty years. The Light send that he could be again.

A loud crack to the south sent Ituralde’s hand to the hilt of his longsword. There was a faint creak of leather and metal as others eased their weapons. For the rest, silence. The forest was as still as a frozen tomb. Only a limb breaking under the weight of snow. After a moment, he let himself relax—as much as he

had relaxed since the tales came north of the Dragon Reborn appearing in the sky at Falme. Perhaps the man really was the Dragon Reborn, perhaps he really had appeared in the sky, but whatever the truth, those tales had set Arad Doman on fire.

Ituralde was sure he could have put out that fire, given a freer hand. It was not boasting to think so. He knew what he could do, with a battle, a campaign, or a war. But ever since the Council had decided the King would be safer smuggled out of Bandar Eban, Alsalam seemed to have taken into his head that he was the rebirth of Artur Hawkwing. His signature and seal had marked scores of battle orders since, flooding out from wherever the Council had him hidden. They would not say where that was, even to Ituralde himself. Every woman on the Council that he confronted went flat-eyed and evasive at any mention of the King. He could almost believe they did not know where Alsalam was. A ridiculous thought, of course. The Council kept an unblinking eye on the King. Ituralde had always believed the merchant Houses interfered too much, yet he wished they would interfere now. Why they remained silent was a mystery, for a king who damaged trade did not remain long on the throne.

He was loyal to his oaths, and Alsalam was a friend, besides, but the orders the King sent could not have been better written to achieve chaos. Nor could they be ignored. Alsalam was the King. But he had commanded Ituralde to march north with all possible speed against a great gathering of Dragonsworn that Alsalam supposedly knew of from secret spies, then ten days later, with no Dragonsworn yet in sight, an order came to move south again, with all possible speed, against another gathering that never materialized. He had been commanded to concentrate his forces to defend Bandar Eban when a three-pronged attack might have ended it all and to divide them when a hammer blow could have done the same, to harry ground he knew the Dragonsworn had abandoned, and to march away from where he knew they camped. Worse, Alsalam's orders often had gone directly to the powerful nobles who were supposed to be following Ituralde, sending Machir in this direction, Teacal in that, Rahman in a third. Four times, pitched battles had resulted from parts of the army blundering into one another in the night while moving to the King's express command and expecting none but enemies ahead. And all the while the Dragonsworn gained numbers, and confidence. Ituralde had had his triumphs—at Solanje and Maseen, at Lake Somal and Kandelmar—the Lords of Katar had learned not to sell the products of their mines and forges to the enemies of Arad Doman—but always, Alsalam's orders wasted his gains.

This last order was different, though. For one thing, a Gray Man had killed

Lady Tuva trying to stop it from reaching him. Why the Shadow might fear this order more than any other was a mystery, yet it was all the more reason to move swiftly. Before Alsalam reached him with another. This order opened many possibilities, and he had considered every last one he could see. But the good ones all started here, today. When small chances of success were all that remained, you had to seize them.

A snowjay's strident cry rang out in the distance, then a second time, a third. Cupping his hands around his mouth, Ituralde repeated the three harsh calls. Moments later a shaggy, pale dapple gelding appeared out of the trees, his rider in a white cloak streaked with black. Man and horse alike would have been hard to see in the snowy forest had they been standing still. The rider pulled up beside Ituralde. A stocky man, he wore only a single sword, with a short blade, and there were a cased bow and a quiver fastened to his saddle.

"Looks like they all came, my Lord," he said in his permanently hoarse voice, pushing his cowl back from his head. Someone had tried to hang Donjel when he was young, though the reason was lost in the years. What remained of his short-cropped hair was iron-gray. The dark leather patch covering the socket of his right eye was a remnant of another youthful scrape. One eye or two, though, he was the best scout Ituralde had ever known. "Most, anyways," he went on. "They put two rings of sentries around the lodge, one inside the other. You can see them a mile off, but nobody will get close without them at the lodge hearing of it in time to get away. By the tracks, they didn't bring no more men than you said they could, not enough to count. Course," he added wryly, "that still leaves you outnumbered a fair bit."

Ituralde nodded. He had offered the White Ribbon, and the men he was to meet had accepted. Three days when men pledged under the Light, by their souls and hope of salvation, not to draw a weapon against another or shed blood. The White Ribbon had not been tested in this war, however, and these days some men had strange ideas of where salvation lay. Those who called themselves Dragonsworn, for instance. He had always been called a gambler, though he was not. The trick was in knowing what risks you could take. And sometimes, in knowing which ones you had to take.

Pulling a packet sewn into oiled silk from his boot top, he handed it to Donjel. "If I don't reach Coron Ford in two days, take this to my wife."

The scout tucked the packet somewhere beneath his cloak, touched his forehead, and turned his horse west. He had carried its like for Ituralde before, usually on the eve of battle. The Light send this was not the time Tamsin would have to open that packet. She would come after him—she had told him so—the

first incident ever of the living haunting the dead.

“Jaalam,” Ituralde said, “let us see what waits at Lady Osana’s hunting lodge.” As he heeled Dart forward, the others fell in behind him.

The sun rose to its height and began again to descend as they rode. The dark clouds in the north moved closer, and the chill bit deeper. There was no sound but the crunch of hooves breaking through the snow crust. The forest seemed empty save for themselves. He did not see any of the sentries Donjel had spoken of. The man’s opinion of what could be seen from a mile differed from that of most. They would be expecting him, of course. And watching to make sure he was not followed by an army, White Ribbon or no White Ribbon. A good many of them likely had reasons they felt sufficient to feather Rodel Ituralde with arrows. A lord might pledge the White Ribbon for his men, but would all of those feel bound? Sometimes, there were chances you just had to take.

About midafternoon, Osana’s so-called hunting lodge loomed suddenly out of the trees, a mass of pale towers and slender, pointed domes that would have fitted well among the palaces of Bandar Eban itself. Her hunting had always been for men or power, her trophies numerous and noteworthy despite her relative youth, and the “hunts” that had taken place here would have raised eyebrows even in the capital. The lodge lay desolate, now. Broken windows gaped like mouths with jagged teeth. None showed a glimmer of light or movement. The snow covering the cleared ground around the lodge had been well trampled by horses, however. The ornate brass-bound gates of the main courtyard stood open, and he rode through without slowing, followed by his men. The horses’ hooves clattered on the paving stones, where the snow had been beaten to slush.

No servants came out to greet him, not that he had expected any. Osana had vanished early in the troubles that now shook Arad Doman like a dog shaking a rat, and her servants had drifted quickly to others of her house, taking whatever places they could find. These days, the masterless starved, or turned bandit. Or Dragonsworn. Dismounting in front of the broad marble stairway at the end of the courtyard, he handed Dart’s reins to one of his armstrongs, and Jaalam ordered the men to take shelter where they could find it for themselves and the animals. Eyeing the marble balconies and wide windows that surrounded the courtyard, they moved as if expecting a crossbow bolt between the shoulder blades. One set of stable doors stood slightly ajar, but in spite of the cold, they divided themselves between the corners of the courtyard, huddling with the horses where they could keep watch in every direction. If the worst came, perhaps a few might make it out.

Removing his gauntlets, he tucked them behind his belt and checked his

lace as he climbed the stairs with Jaalam. Snow that had been trodden underfoot and frozen again crackled beneath his boots. He refrained from looking anywhere but straight ahead. He must appear supremely assured, as though there were no possibility events should go other than as he expected. Confidence was one key to victory. The other side believing you were confident was sometimes almost as good as actually being confident. At the head of the stairs, Jaalam pulled open one of the tall, carved doors by its gilded ring. Ituralde touched his beauty spot with a finger to make sure it was in place—his cheeks were too cold to feel the black velvet star clinging—before he stepped inside. As self-assured as he would have been at a ball.

The cavernous entry hall was as icy as the outside. Their breath made feathered mists. Unlit, the space seemed already wreathed in twilight. The floor was a colorful mosaic of hunters and animals, the tiles chipped in places, as though heavy weights had been dragged over them, or perhaps dropped. Aside from a single toppled plinth that might once have held a large vase or a small statue, the hall was bare. What the servants had not taken when they fled had long since been looted by bandits. A single man awaited them, white-haired and more gaunt than when Ituralde had last seen him. His breastplate was battered, and his earring was just a small gold hoop, but his lace was immaculate, and the sparkling red quarter moon beside his left eye would have gone well at court, in better times.

“By the Light, be welcome under the White Ribbon, Lord Ituralde,” he said formally, with a slight bow.

“By the Light, I come under the White Ribbon, Lord Shimron,” Ituralde replied, making his courtesy in return. Shimron had been one of Alsalam’s most trusted advisors. Until he joined the Dragonsworn, at least. Now he stood high in their councils. “My armsman is Jaalam Nishur, honor bound to House Ituralde, as are all who came with me.”

There had been no House Ituralde before Rodel, but Shimron answered Jaalam’s bow, hand to heart. “Honor be to honor. Will you accompany me, Lord Ituralde?” he said as he straightened.

The great doors to the ballroom were gone from their hinges, though Ituralde could hardly imagine bandits looting those. They left a tall pointed arch wide enough for ten men to pass. Within the windowless oval room, half a hundred lanterns of every size and sort beat at shadows, though the light barely reached the domed ceiling. Separated by a wide expanse of floor, two groups of men stood against the painted walls, and if the White Ribbon had induced them to leave off helmets, all two hundred or more were armored otherwise, and

certainly no one had put aside his swords. To one side were a few Domani lords as powerful as Shimron—Rajabi, Wakeda, Ankaer—each surrounded by his cluster of lesser lords and sworn commoners and smaller clusters, of few as two or three, many containing no nobles at all. The Dragonsworn had councils, but no one commander. Still, each of those men was a leader in his own right, some counting their followers in scores, a few in thousands. None appeared happy to be where he was, and one or two shot glares across the floor, to where fifty or sixty Taraboners stood in one solid mass and scowled back. Dragonsworn they might all be, yet there was little love lost between Domani and Taraboners. Ituralde almost smiled at the sight of the outlanders, though. He had not dared to count on half so many appearing today.

“Lord Rodel Ituralde comes under the White Ribbon.” Shimron’s voice rang through the lantern shadows. “Let whoever may think of violence search his heart, and consider his soul.” And that was the end of formality.

“Why does Lord Ituralde offer the White Ribbon?” Wakeda demanded, one hand gripping the hilt of his longsword and the other in a fist at his side. He was not a tall man, though taller than Ituralde, but as haughty as if he held the throne himself. Women had called him beautiful, once. Now a slanting black scarf covered the socket of his missing right eye, and his beauty spot was a black arrowhead pointing at the thick scar running from his cheek up onto his forehead. “Does he intend to join us? Or ask us to surrender? All know the Wolf is bold as well as devious. Is he that bold?” A rumble rose among the men on his side of the room, part mirth, part anger.

Ituralde clasped his hands behind his back to keep from fingering the ruby in his left ear. That was widely known as a sign that he was angry, and sometimes he did it on purpose, but he needed to present a calm face, now. Even while the man spoke past his ear! No. Calm. Duels were entered into in anger, but he was here to fight a duel, and that required calm. Words could be deadlier weapons than swords.

“Every man here knows we have another enemy to the south,” he said in a steady voice. “The Seanchan have swallowed Tarabon.” He ran his gaze over the Taraboners, and met flat stares. He never had been able to read Taraboners’ faces. Between those preposterous mustaches—like hairy tusks; worse than a Saldaean’s!—and those ridiculous veils, they might as well wear masks, and the poor light from the lanterns did not help. But he had seen them veiled in mail, and he needed them. “They have flooded onto Almoth Plain, and moved ever north. Their intent is clear. They mean to have Arad Doman, too. They mean to have the whole world, I fear.”

“Does Lord Ituralde want to know who we will support if these Seanchan invade us?” Wakeda demanded.

“I have true faith you will fight for Arad Doman, Lord Wakeda,” Ituralde said mildly. Wakeda went purple at having the direct insult flung in his teeth, and his oath-men’s hands went to hilts.

“Refugees have brought word that there are Aiel on the plain, now,” Shimron put in quickly, as though he feared Wakeda might break the White Ribbon. None of Wakeda’s oath-men would draw steel unless he did, or commanded them to. “They fight for the Dragon Reborn, so say the reports. He must have sent them, perhaps as an aid to us. No one has ever defeated an Aiel army, not even Artur Hawkwing. You recall the Blood Snow, Lord Ituralde, when we were younger? I believe you agree with me that we did not defeat them there, whatever the histories may say, and I cannot believe the Seanchan have the numbers we did then. I myself have heard of Seanchan moving south, away from the border. No, I suspect the next we hear will be of them *retreating* from the plain, not advancing on us.” He was not a bad commander in the field, but he had always been pedantic.

Ituralde smiled. Word came more swiftly from the south than from anywhere else, but he had been afraid he would have to bring up the Aiel, and they might have thought he was trying to trick them. He could hardly believe it himself, Aiel on Almoth Plain. He did not point out that Aiel sent to help the Dragonsworn were more likely to have appeared in Arad Doman itself. “I’ve questioned refugees, too, and they speak of Aiel raids, not armies. Whatever the Aiel are doing on the plain may have slowed the Seanchan, but it hasn’t turned them back. Their flying beasts have begun scouting on our side of the border. That does not smack of retreat.”

Producing the paper from his sleeve with a flourish, he held it up so all could see the Sword and Hand impressed in green-and-blue wax. As always of late, he had used a hot blade to separate the Royal Seal on one side while leaving it whole, so he could show it unbroken to doubters. There had been plenty of those, when they heard some of Alsalam’s orders. “I have orders from King Alsalam to gather as many men as I can, from wherever I can find them, and strike as hard as I can at the Seanchan.” He took a deep breath. Here, he took another chance, and Alsalam might have his head on the block unless the dice fell the right way. “I offer a truce. I pledge in the King’s name not to move against you in any way so long as the Seanchan remain a threat to Arad Doman, if you will all pledge the same and fight beside me against them until they are beaten back.”

A stunned silence answered him. Bull-necked Rajabi appeared poleaxed. Wakeda chewed his lip like a startled girl.

Then Shimron muttered, “Can they *be* beaten back, Lord Ituralde? I faced their . . . their chained Aes Sedai on Almoth Plain, as did you.” Boots scraped the floor as men shifted their feet, and faces darkened in bleak anger. No man liked to think he was helpless before an enemy, but enough had been there in the early days, with Ituralde and Shimron, for all to know what this enemy was like.

“They can be defeated, Lord Shimron,” Ituralde replied, “even with their . . . little surprises.” A strange thing to call the earth erupting under your feet, and scouts that rode what looked like Shadowspawn, but he had to sound assured as well as look it. Besides, when you knew what the enemy could do, you adapted. That had been one core of warfare long before the Seanchan appeared. Darkness cut the Seanchan advantages, and so did storms, and a weather-wise could always tell you when a storm was coming. “A wise man stops chewing when he reaches bone,” he continued, “but so far, the Seanchan have had their meat sliced thin before they reached for it. I intend to give them a tough shank to gnaw. More, I have a plan to make them snap so fast they’ll break their teeth on bone before they have a mouthful of meat. Now. I have pledged. Will you?”

It was hard not to hold his breath. Each man seemed to be looking inward. He could all but see them mulling it over. The Wolf had a plan. The Seanchan had chained Aes Sedai and flying beasts and the Light alone knew what else. But the Wolf had a plan. The Seanchan. The Wolf.

“If any man can defeat them,” Shimron said finally, “you can, Lord Ituralde. I will so pledge.”

“I *do* so pledge!” Rajabi shouted. “We’ll chase them back across the ocean where they came from!” He had a bull’s temperament as well as its neck.

Surprisingly, Wakeda thundered his agreement with equal enthusiasm, and then a storm of voices broke, calling that they would match the King’s pledge, that they would smash the Seanchan, even some that they would follow the Wolf into the Pit of Doom. All very gratifying, but not all Ituralde had come for.

“If you ask *us* to fight for Arad Doman,” one voice shouted above the rest, “then ask *us*!” The men who had been calling their pledges fell to angry mutters and half-heard curses.

Hiding his pleasure behind a bland expression, Ituralde turned to face the speaker, on the other side of the room. The Taraboner was a lean man, with a sharp nose that made a tent of his veil. His eyes were hard, though, and keen. Some of the other Taraboners frowned as if displeased he had spoken, so it

appeared they had no one leader any more than the Domani, but he had spoken. Ituralde had hoped for the pledges he had received, but they were not necessary to his plan. The Taraboners were. At least, they would make it a hundred times more likely to work. He addressed the man courteously, with a bow.

“I offer you the chance to fight for Tarabon, my good Lord. The Aiel are making some confusion on the plain; the refugees speak of it. Tell me, could a small company of your men—a hundred, perhaps two—cross the plain in that disorder and enter Tarabon, if their armor was marked with stripes, as those who ride for the Seanchan?”

It seemed impossible the Taraboners face could grow any tighter, yet it did, and it was the turn of the men on his side of the room to mutter angrily and curse. Enough word had come north for them to know of a king and panarch put on their thrones by the Seanchan and swearing fealty to an empress on the other side of the Aryth Ocean. They could not like reminders of how many of their countrymen now rode for this empress. Most of the “Seanchan” on Almoth Plain were Taraboners.

“What good could one small company do?” the lean man growled, contemptuous.

“Little good,” Ituralde replied. “But if there were fifty such companies? A hundred?” These Taraboners might have that many men behind them, all told. “If they all struck on the same day, all across Tarabon? I myself would ride with them, and as many of my men as can be outfitted in Taraboner armor. Just so you will know this is not simply a stratagem to get rid of you.”

Behind him, the Domani began protesting loudly. Wakeda the loudest of all, if it could be believed! The Wolf’s plan was all very well, but they wanted the Wolf himself at their head. Most of the Taraboners began arguing among themselves, over whether so many men could cross the plain without being discovered, even in such small bands, over what good if any they could do in Tarabon in small companies, over whether they were willing to wear armor marked with Seanchan stripes. Taraboners argued as easily as Saldaeans, and as hotly. Not the sharp-nosed man. He met Ituralde’s gaze steadily. Then gave a slight nod. It was hard to tell, behind those thick mustaches, but Ituralde thought he smiled.

The last tension faded from Ituralde’s shoulders. The fellow would not have agreed while the others argued if he were not more of a leader among them than he seemed. The others would come, too, he was certain. They would ride south with him into the heart of what the Seanchan considered their own, and slap them hard and full across the face. The Taraboners would want to stay afterward, of

course, and continue the fight in their own homeland. He could not expect anything more. Which would leave him and the few thousand men he could take with him to be hounded back north again, all the long way across Almoth Plain. If the Light shone on him, hounded with fury.

He returned the Taraboner's smile, if smile it was. With any luck, furious generals would not see where he was leading them until it was too late. And if they did . . . Well, he had a second plan.

Eamon Valda held his cloak tight around himself as he tramped through the snow among the trees. Cold and steady, the wind sighed through the snow-laden branches, a deceptively quiet sound in the damp gray light. It sliced through the thick white wool as through gauze, chilling him to the bone. The camp sprawling around him through the forest was too quiet. Movement provided a little warmth, but in this, men huddled together unless driven to move.

Abruptly he stopped in his tracks, wrinkling his nose at a sudden stench, a gagging foulness like twenty midden heaps crawling with maggots. He did not gag; instead, he scowled. The camp lacked the precision he preferred. The tents were clustered haphazardly wherever the limbs overhead grew thickest, the horses tethered close by rather than properly picketed. It was the sort of slackness that led to filth. Unwatched, the men would bury horse dung under a few shovels of dirt to be done with it quicker, and dig latrines where they would not have to walk far in the cold. Any officer of his who allowed that would cease to be an officer, and learn firsthand how to use a shovel.

He was scanning the camp for the source of the smell, when suddenly there was no smell. The wind did not change; the stink just vanished. He was startled for only a moment. Walking on, he scowled all the harder. The stench had come from *somewhere*. He would find whoever thought discipline had slackened, and make examples of them. Discipline had to be tight, now; tighter than ever.

At the edge of a broad clearing, he paused again. The snow in the clearing was smooth and unmarked despite the camp hidden all around it. Staying back among the trees, he scanned the sky. Scudding gray clouds hid the noonday sun. A flicker of motion made his breath catch before he realized it was just a bird, some small brown thing wary of hawks and staying low. He barked a laugh that was more than touched with bitterness. Little more than a month since the Light-cursed Seanchan had swallowed Amador and the Fortress of Light in one unbelievable gulp, but he had learned new instincts. Wise men learned, while fools . . .

Airon had been a fool, puffed up with old tales of glory brightened by age and new hope of winning real power to go with his crown. He refused to see the reality in front of his eyes, and Airon's Disaster had been the result. Valda had heard it named the Battle of Jeramel, but only by some of the bare handful of Amadician nobles who escaped, dazed as poleaxed steers yet still trying mechanically to put the best face on events. He wondered what Airon had called it when the Seanchan's tame witches began tearing his orderly ranks to bloody rags. He could still see that in his head, the earth turning to fountains of fire. He saw it in his dreams. Well, Airon was dead, cut down trying to flee the field and his head displayed on a Taraboner's lance. A suitable death for a fool. He, on the other hand, had over nine thousand of the Children gathered around him. A man who saw clearly could make much out of that in times like these.

On the far side of the clearing, just inside the treeline, was a rude house that had once belonged to a charcoal burner, a single room with winter-brown weeds thick in the gaps between the stones. By all appearances, the man had abandoned the place some time ago; parts of the thatch roof sagged dangerously, and whatever had once filled the narrow windows was long since gone, replaced now by dark blankets. Two guards stood beside the ill-fitting wooden door, big men with the scarlet shepherd's crook behind the golden sunflare on their cloaks. They had their arms wrapped around themselves and were stamping their boots against the cold. Neither could have reached his sword in time to do any good, had Valda been an enemy. Questioners liked to work indoors.

Their faces might have been carved stone as they watched him approach. Neither offered more than a halfhearted salute. Not for a man without the shepherd's crook, even if he was Lord Captain Commander of the Children. One opened his mouth as if to question Valda's purpose, but Valda walked by them and pushed open the rough door. At least they did not try to stop him. He would have killed them both, if they had.

At his entrance, Asunawa looked up from the crooked table where he was perusing a small book, one bony hand cupped around a steaming pewter cup that gave off the odor of spices. His ladder-back chair, the only other piece of furniture in the room, appeared rickety, but someone had strengthened it with rawhide lashings. Valda tightened his mouth to stop a sneer. The High Inquisitor of the Hand of the Light demanded a real roof, not a tent, even if it was thatch sorely in need of patching, and mulled wine when no one else had tasted wine of any sort in a week. A small fire burned on the stone hearth, too, giving a meager warmth. Even cook fires had been banned since before the Disaster, to prevent smoke giving them away. Still, although most Children despised the Questioners,

they held Asunawa in a strange esteem, as if his gray hair and gaunt martyr's face graced him with all the ideals of the Children of the Light. That had been a surprise, when Valda first learned of it; he was unsure whether Asunawa himself knew. In any case, there were enough Questioners to make trouble. Nothing he could not handle, but it was best to avoid that sort of trouble. For now.

"It is almost time," he said, shutting the door behind him. "Are you ready?"

Asunawa made no move to rise or reach for the white cloak folded across the table beside him. There was no sunflare on that, just the scarlet crook. Instead, he folded his hands over the book, hiding the pages. Valda thought it was Mantelar's *The Way of the Light*. Odd reading for the High Inquisitor. More suited to new recruits; those who could not read when they swore were taught so they could study Mantelar's words. "I have reports of an Andoran army in Murandy, my son," Asunawa said. "Deep in Murandy, perhaps."

"Murandy is a long way from here," Valda said as though he did not recognize an old argument starting anew. An argument that Asunawa often seemed to forget he had already lost. But what were Andorans doing in Murandy? If the reports were true; so many were travelers' fantasies wrapped in lies. Andor. The very name rankled in Valda's memory. Morgase was dead, or else a servant to some Seanchan. They had little respect for titles other than their own. Dead or a servant, she was lost to him, and more importantly by far, his plans for Andor were lost. Galadedrid had gone from a useful lever to just another young officer, and one who was too popular with the common soldiers. Good officers were never popular. But Valda was a pragmatic man. The past was the past. New plans had replaced Andor.

"Not so far if we move east, across Altara, my son, across the north of Altara. The Seanchan cannot have moved far from Ebou Dar yet."

Spreading his hands to catch the hearthfire's small warmth, Valda sighed. They had spread like a plague in Tarabon, and here in Amadicia. Why did the man think Altara was different? "Are you forgetting the witches in Altara? With an army of their own, need I remind you? Unless they're into Murandy by now." Those reports he believed, of the witches on the move. In spite of himself, his voice rose. "Maybe this so-called Andoran army you've heard about is the witches, and their army! They gave Caemlyn to al'Thor, remember! And Illian, and half the east! Do you really believe the witches are divided? Do you?" Slowly he drew a deep breath, calming himself. Trying to. Every tale out of the east was worse than the last. A gust of wind down the chimney blew sparks into the room, and he stepped back with a curse. Bloody peasant hovel! Even the chimney was ill made!

Asunawa snapped the small book shut between his palms. His hands were folded as in prayer, but his deep-set eyes suddenly seemed hotter than the fire. "I believe the witches must be destroyed! That is what I believe!"

"I'd settle for knowing how the Seanchan tamed them." With enough tame witches, he could drive al'Thor out of Andor, out of Illian and everywhere else he had settled like the Shadow itself. He could better Hawkwing himself!

"They must be destroyed," Asunawa asserted stubbornly.

"And us with them?" Valda demanded.

A knock came at the door, and at Asunawa's curt summons one of the guards from outside appeared in the doorway, standing rigidly erect, arm snapping across his chest in a crisp salute. "My Lord High Inquisitor," he said respectfully, "the Council of the Anointed is here."

Valda waited. Would the old fool continue to be stubborn with all ten surviving Lords Captain outside, mounted and ready to ride? What was done, was done. What had to be done.

"If it brings down the White Tower," Asunawa said finally, "I can be content. For now. I will come to this meeting."

Valda smiled thinly. "Then I am content. We will see the witches fall together." Certainly, he would see them fall. "I suggest you have your horse readied. We have a long way to ride by nightfall." Whether Asunawa would see it with him was another matter.

Gabrelle enjoyed her rides through the wintery woods with Logain and Toveine. He always let Toveine and her follow at their own pace in a semblance of privacy, so long as they did not lag too far behind. The two Aes Sedai seldom spoke more than absolutely necessary, though, even when they truly were private. They were far from friends. In fact, Gabrelle often wished Toveine would ask to stay behind when Logain offered these outings. It would have been very pleasant to be really alone.

Holding her reins in one green-gloved hand and keeping her fox-lined cloak shut with the other, she let herself feel the cold, just a little, just for the refreshing vigor of it. The snow was not deep, but the morning air was crisp. Dark gray clouds promised more snow, soon. High overhead flew a long-winged bird of some sort. An eagle, perhaps; birds were not her strong point. Plants and minerals stayed in one place while you studied them, and so did books and manuscripts, though those might crumble under her fingers, if they were old enough. She could barely make the bird out at that height, in any case, but an

eagle fit the landscape.

Woodland surrounded them, small dense thickets dotted among more widely spaced trees. Great oaks and towering pines and firs had killed off most of the undergrowth, though here and there the thick brown remains of a hardy vine, waiting for a still distant spring, clung to a boulder or a low gray ledge of stone. She carefully held that landscape in her mind like a novice exercise, chill and empty.

With no one in sight except her two companions, she could almost imagine she was somewhere other than the Black Tower. That horrid name came all too easily to mind, now. A thing as real as the White Tower, and no longer “so-called” for anyone who laid eyes on the great stone barracks buildings that held hundreds of men in training, and the village that had grown up around them. She had lived in that village for nearly two weeks, and there were parts of the Black Tower she still had not seen. Its grounds covered miles, surrounded by the beginnings of a wall of black stone. Still, she could almost forget, here in the woods.

Almost. Except for the bundle of sensation and emotion, the essence of Logain Ablar, that always rode in the back of her mind, a constant feel of controlled wariness, of muscles always on the edge of tensing. A hunting wolf might feel that way, or perhaps a lion. The man’s head moved constantly; even here he watched his surroundings as though expecting attack.

She had never had a Warder—they were needless flamboyance for Browns; a hired servant could do all she needed—and it felt peculiar to be not only part of a bond, but at the wrong end of it, so to speak. Worse than simply the wrong end; *this* bond required her to obey, and she was hedged about with prohibitions. So it was not the same as a Warder bond, really. Sisters did not *force* their Warders to obedience. Well, not very often. And sisters had not bonded men against their will for centuries. Still, it did provide a fascinating study. She had worked at interpreting what she sensed. At times, she could almost read his mind. Other times, it was like fumbling through a mineshaft with no lamp. She supposed she would try to study if her neck were stretched on the headsman’s block. Which, in a very real way, it was. He could sense her as well as she could him.

She must always remember that. Some of the Asha’man might believe the Aes Sedai were resigned to their captivity, but only a fool could think fifty-one sisters who had been forcibly bonded would all embrace resignation, and Logain was no fool. Besides, he knew they had been sent to destroy the Black Tower. Yet if he suspected that they were still trying to find a way to end the threat of hundreds of men who could channel . . . Light, constrained as they were, one

order could halt them in their tracks! You will do nothing to harm the Black Tower. She could not understand why that command had not been given as a simple precaution. They must succeed. Fail, and the world was doomed.

Logain turned in his saddle, an imposing, broad-shouldered figure in a well-fitting coat dark as pitch, without a touch of color save for the silver Sword and the red-and-gold Dragon on his high collar. His black cloak was thrown back, as though he were refusing to let the cold touch him. He might be; these men seemed to believe they had to fight everything, all the time. He smiled at her—reassuringly?—and she blinked. Had she let too much anxiety slip into her end of the bond? It was such a delicate dance, trying to control her emotions, to present just the right responses. It was almost like taking the test for the shawl, where every weave had to be made exactly so, without the slightest falter, despite every manner of distraction, only this test went on and on and on.

He turned his attention on Toveine, and Gabrelle exhaled softly. Just a smile, then. A companionable gesture. He was often congenial. He might have been likable if he were anything but what he was.

Toveine beamed back at him, and Gabrelle had to stop herself from shaking her head in wonderment, not for the first time. Pulling her hood a little forward as though against the cold, so it sheltered her face while giving her an edge to peek around, she studied the Red sister surreptitiously.

Everything she knew of the other woman said she buried her hates in shallow graves, if at all, and Toveine loathed men who could channel as deeply as any Red Gabrelle had ever met. *Any* Red must despise Logain Ablar, after the claims he had made, that the Red Ajah itself had set him up to become a false Dragon. He might be holding his silence now, but the damage was done. There were sisters captive with them who looked at Reds as though thinking they, at least, were caught in a trap of their making. Yet Toveine all but *simpered* at him. Gabrelle bit her underlip in perplexed thought. True, Desandre and Lemai had ordered everyone to achieve cordial relations with the Asha'man who held their bonds—the men must be lulled before the sisters could do anything useful—but Toveine bristled openly at every command from either sister. She had detested yielding to them, and might have refused if Lemai were not also Red, no matter that she had admitted it must be so. Or that no one had recognized her authority once she led them into captivity. She hated that, too. Yet that was when she had begun smiling at Logain.

For that matter, how could Logain sit at the other end of her bond and take that smile as anything but fraud? Gabrelle had picked at that knot before, too, without coming close to untying it. He knew too much about Toveine. Knowing

her Ajah should have been enough. Yet Gabrelle felt as little suspicion in him when he looked at the Red sister as when he looked at her. He was hardly *free* of suspicion; the man was distrustful of everyone, it seemed. But less of *any* sister than of some Asha'man. That made no sense, either.

He's no fool, she reminded herself. So, why? And why for Toveine, as well? What is she scheming at?

Abruptly, Toveine flashed that seemingly warm smile at her, and spoke as if she had voiced at least one of her questions aloud. "With you near," she murmured in a mist of breath, "he's barely aware of me. You've made him *your* captive, sister."

Caught by surprise, Gabrelle flushed in spite of herself. Toveine never made conversation, and to say she disapproved of Gabrelle's situation with Logain was to understate drastically. Seducing him had seemed such an obvious way to get close enough to learn his plans, his weaknesses. After all, even if he *was* an Asha'man, she had been Aes Sedai long before he was born, and she was hardly a total innocent when it came to men. He had been so surprised when he realized what she was doing that she almost thought of *him* as the innocent. More fool, she. Playing the Domani turned out to hide many surprises, and a few pitfalls. Worst of all, a trap she could never reveal to anyone. Something she very much feared that Toveine knew, though, at least in part. But then, any sister who had followed her lead must know, too, and she thought several had. None had spoken of the problem, and none was likely to, of course. Logain could mask the bond, in a crude way she believed would still allow her to find him however well it hid his emotions, but sometimes when they shared a pillow, he let the masking slip. To say the least, the results were . . . devastating. There was no calm restraint, then, no cool study. Not much of reason at all.

Hurriedly she summoned the image of the snowy landscape again and fixed it in her mind. Trees and boulders and smooth, white snow. Smooth, *cold* snow.

Logain did not look back at her, or give any outward sign, but the bond told her that he was aware of her momentary loss of control. The man brimmed with smugness! And *satisfaction!* It was all she could do not to seethe. But he would expect her to seethe, burn him! He *had* to know what she felt from him. Letting her anger rise, though, only filled the fellow with *amusement!* And he was not even attempting to hide it!

Toveine was wearing a small, satisfied smile, Gabrelle noticed, but she had only a moment to wonder why.

They had had the morning to themselves, but now another rider appeared through the trees, a cloakless man in black who angled his horse in their direction

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