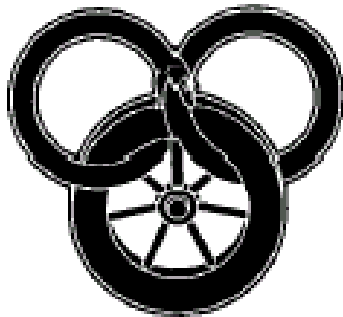


New Spring

by Robert Jordan



The air of Kandor held the sharpness of new spring when Lan returned to the lands where he had always known he would die. Trees bore the first red of new growth, and a few scattered wildflowers dotted winter-brown grass where shadows did not cling to patches of snow, yet the pale sun offered little warmth after the south, a gusting breeze cut through his coat, and grey clouds hinted at more than rain. He was almost home. Almost.

A hundred generations had beaten the wide road nearly as hard as the stone of the surrounding hills, and little dust rose, though a steady stream of ox-carts was leaving the morning farmers' markets in Canluum and merchant trains of tall wagons, surrounded by mounted guards in steel caps and bits of armour, flowed towards the city's high grey walls. Here and there the chains of the Kandori merchants' guild spanned a chest or an Arafellin wore bells, a ruby decorated this man's ear, a pearl brooch that woman's breast, but for the most part the traders' clothes were as subdued as their manner. A merchant who flaunted too much profit discovered it hard to find bargains. By contrast, farmers showed off their success when they came to town. Bright embroidery decorated the striding countrymen's baggy breeches, the women's wide trousers, their cloaks fluttering in the wind. Some wore coloured ribbons in their hair, or a narrow fur collar. They might have been dressed for the coming Bel Tine dances and feasting. Yet country folk eyed strangers as warily as any guard, eyed them and hefted spears or axes and hurried along. The times carried an edge in Kandor, maybe all along the Borderlands. Bandits had sprung up like weeds this past year, and more troubles than usual out of the Blight. Rumour even spoke of a man who channelled the One Power, but then, rumour often did.

Leading his horse toward Canluum, Lan paid as little attention to the stares he and his companion attracted as he did to Bukama's scowls and carping. Bukama had raised him from the cradle, Bukama and other men now dead, and he could not recall seeing anything but a glower on that weathered face, even when Bukama spoke praise. This time his mutters were for a stone-bruised hoof that had him afoot, but he could always find something.

They did attract attention, two very tall men walking their mounts and a packhorse with a pair of tattered wicker hampers, their plain clothes worn and travel-stained. Their harness and weapons were well-tended, though. A young man and an old, hair hanging to their shoulders and held back by a braided leather cord around the temples. The *hadori* drew eyes. Especially here in the Borderlands, where people had some idea what it meant.

'Fools,' Bukama grumbled. 'Do they think we're bandits? Do they think we mean to rob the lot of them, at midday on the high road?' He glared and shifted the sword at his hip in a way that brought considering stares from a number of merchants' guards. A stout farmer prodded his ox wide of them.

Lan kept silent. A certain reputation clung to Malkieri who still wore the *hadori*, though not for banditry, but reminding Bukama would only send him into a black humour for days. His mutters shifted to the chances of a decent bed that night, of a decent meal before. Bukama seldom complained when there actually was no bed or no food, only about prospects and the inconsequential. He expected little, and trusted to less.

Neither food nor lodging entered Lan's thoughts, despite the distance they had travelled. His head kept swinging north. He remained aware of everyone around him, especially those who glanced his way more than once, aware of the jingle of harness and the creak of saddles, the clop of hooves, the snap of wagon-canvas loose on its hoops. Any sound out of place would shout at him. That had been the first lesson Bukama and his friends had imparted in his childhood; be aware of everything, even when asleep. Only the dead could afford oblivion. Lan remained aware, but the Blight lay north. Still miles away across the hills, yet he could feel it, feel the twisted corruption.

Just his imagination, but no less real for that. It had pulled at him in the south, in Cairhien and Andor, even in Tear, almost five hundred leagues distant. Two years away from the Borderlands, his personal war abandoned for another, and every day the tug grew stronger. The Blight meant death to most men. Death and the Shadow, a rotting land tainted by the Dark One's breath, where anything at all could kill. Two tosses of a coin had decided where to begin anew. Four nations bordered the Blight, but his war covered the length of it, from the Aryth Ocean to the Spine of the World. One place to meet death was as good as another. He was almost home. Almost back to the Blight.

A dry moat surrounded Canluum's wall, fifty paces wide and ten deep, spanned by five broad stone bridges with towers at either end as tall as those that lined the wall itself. Raids out of the Blight by Trollocs and Myrddraal often struck much deeper into Kandor than Canluum, but none had ever made it inside the city's

wall. The Red Stag waved above every tower. A proud man, was Lord Varan, the High Seat of House Marcasiev; Queen Ethenielle did not fly so many of her own banners even in Chachin itself.

The guards at the outer towers, in helmets with Varan's antlered crest and the Red Stag on their chests, peered into the backs of wagons before allowing them to trundle on to the bridge, or occasionally motioned someone to push a hood further back. No more than a gesture was necessary; the law in every Borderland forbade hiding your face inside village or town, and no one wanted to be mistaken for one of the Eyeless trying to sneak into the city. Hard gazes followed Lan and Bukama on to the bridge. Their faces were clearly visible. And their *hadori*. No recognition lit any of those watching eyes, though. Two years was a long time in the Borderlands. A great many men could die in two years.

Lan noticed that Bukama had gone silent, always a bad sign, and cautioned him. 'I never start trouble,' the older man snapped, but he did stop fingering his swordhilt.

The guards on the wall above the open iron-plated gates and those on the bridge wore only back- and breastplates for armour, yet they were no less watchful, especially of a pair of Malkieri with their hair tied back. Bukama's mouth grew tighter at every step.

'Al'Lan Mandragoran! The Light preserve us, we heard you were dead fighting the Aiel at the Shining Walls!' The exclamation came from a young guard, taller than the rest, almost as tall as Lan. Young, perhaps a year or two less than he, yet the gap seemed ten years. A lifetime. The guard bowed deeply, left hand on his knee. '*Tai'shar Malkier!*' True blood of Malkier. 'I stand ready, Majesty.'

'I am not a king,' Lan said quietly. Malkier was dead. Only the war still lived. In him, at least.

Bukama was not quiet. 'You stand ready for *what*, boy?' The heel of his bare hand struck the guard's breastplate right over the Red Stag, driving the man upright and back a step. 'You cut your hair short and leave it unbound!' Bukama spat the words. 'You're sworn to a Kandori lord! By what right do you claim to be Malkieri?'

The young man's face reddened as he floundered for answers. Other guards started towards the pair, then halted when Lan let his reins fall. Only that, but they knew his name, now. They eyed his bay stallion, standing still and alert behind him, almost as cautiously as they did him. A warhorse was a formidable weapon, and they could not know Cat Dancer was only half-trained yet.

Space opened up as people already through the gates hurried a little distance before turning to watch, while those still on the bridge pressed back. Shouts rose in both directions from people wanting to know what was holding traffic. Bukama ignored it all, intent on the red-faced guard. He had not dropped the reins of the packhorse or his yellow roan gelding.

An officer appeared from the stone guardhouse inside the gates, crested helmet under his arm, but one hand in a steel-backed gauntlet resting on his swordhilt. A bluff, greying man with white scars on his face, Alin Seroku had soldiered forty years along the Blight, yet his eyes widened slightly at the sight of Lan. Plainly he had heard the tales of Lan's death, too.

'The Light shine upon you, Lord Mandragoran. The son of el'Leanna and al'Akir, blessed be their memories, is always welcome.' Seroku's eyes flickered towards Bukama, not in welcome. He planted his feet in the middle of the gateway. Five horsemen could have passed easily on either side, but he meant himself for a bar, and he was. None of the guards shifted a boot, yet every one had hand on swordhilt. All but the young man meeting Bukama's glares with his own. 'Lord Marcasiev has commanded us to keep the peace strictly,' Seroku went on, half in apology. But no more than half. 'The city is on edge. All these tales of a man channelling are bad enough, but there have been murders in the street this last month and more, in broad daylight, and strange accidents. People whisper about Shadowspawn loose inside the walls.'

Lan gave a slight nod. With the Blight so close, people always muttered of Shadowspawn when they had no other explanation, whether for a sudden death or unexpected crop failure. He did not take up Cat Dancer's reins, though. 'We intend to rest here a few days before riding north.'

For a moment he thought Seroku was surprised. Did the man expect pledges to keep the peace, or apologies for Bukama's behaviour? Either would shame Bukama, now. A pity if the war ended here. Lan did not want to die killing Kandori.

His old friend turned from the young guard, who stood quivering, fists clenched at his sides. 'All fault here is mine,' Bukama announced to the air in a flat voice. 'I had no call for what I did. By my mother's name, I will keep Lord Marcasiev's peace. By my mother's name, I will not draw sword inside Canluum's walls.'

Seroku's jaw dropped, and Lan hid his own shock with difficulty.

Hesitating only a moment, the scar-faced officer stepped aside, bowing and touching swordhilt then heart. 'There is always welcome for Lan Mandragoran Dai Shan,' he said formally. 'And for Bukama Marenellin, the hero of Salmarna. May you both know peace, one day.'

'There is peace in the mother's last embrace,' Lan responded with equal formality, touching hilt and heart.

'May she welcome us home, one day,' Seroku finished. No one really wished for the grave, but that was the only place to find peace in the Borderlands.

Face like iron, Bukama strode ahead pulling Sun Lance and the packhorse after him, not waiting for Lan. This was not well.

Canluum was a city of stone and brick, its paved streets twisting around tall hills. The Aiel invasion had never reached the Borderlands, but the ripples of war always diminished trade a long way from any battles, and now that fighting and winter were both finished, the city had filled with people from every land. Despite the Blight practically on the city's doorstep, gemstones mined in the surrounding hills made Canluum wealthy. And, strangely enough, some of the finest clockmakers anywhere. The cries of hawkers and shopkeepers shouting their wares rose above the hum of the crowd even away from the terraced market squares. Colourfully-dressed musicians, or jugglers, or tumblers performed at every intersection. A handful of lacquered carriages swayed through the mass of people and wagons and carts and barrows, and horses with gold- or silver-mounted saddles and bridles picked their way through the throng, their riders' garb embroidered as ornately as the animals' tack and trimmed with fox or marten or ermine. Hardly a foot of street was left bare anywhere. Lan even saw several Aes Sedai, women with serene, ageless faces. Enough people recognized them on sight that they created eddies in the crowd, swirls to clear a way. Respect or caution, awe or fear, there were sufficient reasons for a king to step aside for a sister. Once you might have gone a year without seeing an Aes Sedai even in the Borderlands, but the sisters seemed to be everywhere since their old Amyrlin Seat died a few months earlier. Maybe it was those tales of a man channelling; they would not let him run free long, if he existed. Lan kept his eyes away from them. The *hadori* could be enough to attract the interest of a sister seeking a Warder.

Shockingly, lace veils covered many women's faces. Thin lace, sheer enough to reveal that they had eyes, and no one had ever heard of a female Myrddraal, but Lan had never expected law to yield to mere fashion. Next they would take down the oil-lamps lining the streets and let the nights grow black. Even more shocking than the veils, Bukama looked right at some of those women and did not open his mouth. Then a jut-nosed man named Nazar Kurenin rode in front of Bukama's eyes, and he did not blink. The young guard surely had been born after the Blight swallowed Malkier, but Kurenin, his hair cut short and wearing a forked beard, was twice Lan's age. The years had not erased the marks of his *hadori* completely. There were many like Kurenin, and the sight of him should have set Bukama spluttering. Lan eyed his friend worriedly.

They had been moving steadily towards the centre of the city, climbing towards the highest hill, Stag's Stand. Lord Marcasiev's fortress-like palace covered the peak, with those of lesser lords and ladies on the terraces below. Any threshold up there offered warm welcome for al'Lan Mandragoran. Perhaps warmer than he wanted now. Balls and hunts, with nobles invited from as much as fifty miles away, including from across the border with Arafel. People avid to hear of his 'adventures'. Young men wanting to join his forays into the Blight, and old men to compare their experiences there with his. Women eager to share the bed of a man whom, so fool stories claimed, the Blight could not kill. Kandor and Arafel were as bad as any southland at times; some of those women would be married. And there would be men like Kurenin, working to submerge memories of lost Malkier, and women who no longer adorned their foreheads with the *ki'sain* in pledge that they would swear their sons to oppose the Shadow while they breathed. Lan could ignore the false smiles while they named him al'Lan Dai Shan, diademed battle lord and uncrowned king of a nation betrayed while he was in his cradle. In his present mood, Bukama might do murder. Or worse, given his oaths at the gate. He would keep those to the death.

'Varan Marcasiev will hold us a week or more with ceremony,' Lan said, turning down a narrower street that led away from the Stand. 'With what we've heard of bandits and the like, he will be just as happy if I don't appear to make my bows.' True enough. He had met the High Seat of House Marcasiev only once, years past, but he remembered a man given entirely to his duties.

Bukama followed without complaint about missing a palace bed or the feasts the cooks would prepare. It

was worrying.

No palaces rose in the hollows towards the north wall, only shops and taverns, inns and stables and wagonyards. Bustle surrounded the factors' long warehouses, but no carriages came to the Deeps, and most streets were barely wide enough for carts. They were just as jammed with people as the wide ways, though, and every bit as noisy. Here, the street performers' finery was tarnished, yet they made up for it by being louder, and buyers and sellers alike bellowed as if trying to be heard in the next street. Likely some of the crowd were cutpurses, slipfingers, and other thieves, finished with a morning's business higher up or headed there for the afternoon. It would have been a wonder otherwise, with so many merchants in town. The second time unseen fingers brushed his coat in the crowd, Lan tucked his purse under his shirt. Any banker would advance him more against the Shienaran estate he had been granted on reaching manhood, but loss of the gold on hand meant accepting the hospitality of Stag's Stand.

At the first three inns they tried, slate-roofed cubes of grey stone with bright signs out front, the innkeepers had not a cubbyhole to offer. Lesser traders and merchants' guards filled them to the attics. Bukama began to mutter about making a bed in a hayloft, yet he never mentioned the feather mattresses and linens waiting on the Stand. Leaving their horses with ostlers at a fourth inn, The Blue Rose, Lan entered determined to find some place for them if it took the rest of the day.

Inside, a greying woman, tall and handsome, presided over a crowded common room where talk and laughter almost drowned out the slender girl singing to the music of her zither. Pipesmoke wreathed the ceiling beams, and the smell of roasting lamb floated from the kitchens. As soon as the innkeeper saw Lan and Bukama, she gave her blue-striped apron a twitch and strode towards them, dark eyes sharp.

Before Lan could open his mouth, she seized Bukama's ears, pulled his head down, and kissed him. Kandori women were seldom retiring, but even so it was a remarkably thorough kiss in front of so many eyes. Pointing fingers and snickering grins flashed among the tables.

'It's good to see you again, too, Racelle,' Bukama murmured with a small smile when she finally released him. 'I didn't know you had an inn here. Do you think -?' He lowered his gaze rather than meeting her eyes rudely, and that proved a mistake. Racelle's fist caught his jaw so hard that his hair flailed as he staggered.

'Six years without a word,' she snapped. 'Six years?' Grabbing his ears again, she gave him another kiss, longer this time. Took it rather than gave. A sharp twist of his ears met every attempt to do anything besides standing bent over and letting her do as she wished. At least she would not put a knife in his heart if she was kissing him. Perhaps not.

'I think Mistress Arovni might find Bukama a room somewhere,' a man's familiar voice said drily behind Lan. 'And you, too, I suppose.'

Turning, Lan clasped forearms with the only man in the room beside Bukama of a height with him, Ryne Venamar, his oldest friend except for Bukama. The innkeeper still had Bukama occupied as Ryne led Lan to a small table in the corner. Five years older, Ryne was Malkieri too, but his hair fell in two long bell-laced braids, and more silver bells lined the turned-down tops of his boots and ran up the sleeves of his yellow coat. Bukama did not exactly dislike Ryne - not exactly - yet in his present mood, only Nazar Kurenin could have had a worse effect.

While the pair of them were settling themselves on benches, a serving maid in a striped apron brought hot spiced wine. Apparently Ryne had ordered as soon as he saw Lan. Dark-eyed and full-lipped, she stared Lan up and down openly as she set his mug in front of him, then whispered her name, Lira, in his ear, and an invitation, if he was staying the night. All he wanted that night was sleep, so he lowered his gaze, murmuring that she honoured him too much. Lira did not let him finish. With a raucous laugh, she bent to bite his ear, hard, then announced that by tomorrow's sun she would have honoured him till his knees would not hold him up. More laughter flared at the tables around them.

Ryne forestalled any possibility of righting matters, tossing her a fat coin and giving her a slap on the bottom to send her off. Lira offered him a dimpled smile as she slipped the silver into the neck of her dress, but she left sending smoky glances over her shoulder at Lan that made him sigh. If he tried to say no now, she might well pull a knife over the insult.

'So your luck still holds with women, too.' Ryne's laugh had an edge. Perhaps he fancied her himself. 'The Light knows, they can't find you handsome; you get uglier every year. Maybe I ought to try some of that coy modesty, let women lead me by the nose.'

Lan opened his mouth, then took a drink instead of speaking. He should not have to explain, but Ryne's father had taken him to Arafel the year Lan turned ten. The man wore a single blade on his hip instead of two on his back, yet he was Arafellin to his toenails. He actually started conversations with women who had not spoken to him first. Lan, raised by Bukama and his friends in Shienar, had been surrounded by a small community who held to Malkieri ways.

A number of people around the room were watching their table, sidelong glances over mugs and goblets. A plump copper-skinned woman wearing a much thicker dress than Domani women usually did made no effort to hide her stares as she spoke excitedly to a fellow with curled moustaches and a large pearl in his ear. Probably wondering whether there would be trouble over Lira. Wondering whether a man wearing the *hadori* really would kill at the drop of a pin.

'I didn't expect to find you in Canluum,' Lan said, setting the wine-mug down. 'Guarding a merchant train?' Bukama and the innkeeper were nowhere to be seen.

Ryne shrugged. 'Out of Shol Arbela. The luckiest trader in Arafel, they say. Said. Much good it did him. We arrived yesterday, and last night footpads slit his throat two streets over. No return money for me this trip.' He flashed a rueful grin and took a deep pull at his wine, perhaps to the memory of the merchant or perhaps to the lost half of his wages. 'Burn me if I thought to see you here, either.'

'You shouldn't listen to rumours, Ryne. I've not taken a wound worth mentioning since I rode south.' Lan decided to twit Bukama if they did get a room, about whether it was already paid for and how. Indignation might take him out of his darkness.

'The Aiel,' Ryne snorted. 'I never thought *they* could put paid to you.' He had never faced Aiel, of course. 'I expected you to be wherever Edeyn Arrel is. Chachin, now, I hear.'

That name snapped Lan's head back to the man across the table. 'Why should I be near the Lady Arrel?' he demanded softly. Softly, but emphasizing her proper title.

'Easy, man,' Ryne said. 'I didn't mean . . .' Wisely, he abandoned that line. 'Burn me, do you mean to say you haven't heard? She's raised the Golden Crane. In your name, of course. Since the year turned, she's been from Fal Moran to Maradon, and coming back now.' Ryne shook his head, the bells in his braids chiming faintly. 'There must be two or three hundred men right here in Canluum ready to follow her. You, I mean. Some you'd not believe. Old Kurenin wept when he heard her speak. All ready to carve Malkier out of the Blight again.'

'What dies in the Blight is gone,' Lan said wearily: He felt more than cold inside. Suddenly Seroku's surprise that he intended to ride north took on new meaning, and the young guard's assertion that he stood ready. Even the looks here in the common room seemed different. And Edeyn was part of it. Always she liked standing in the heart of the storm. 'I must see to my horse,' he told Ryne, scraping his bench back.

Ryne said something about making a round of the taverns that night, but Lan hardly heard. He hurried through the kitchens, hot from iron stoves and stone ovens and open hearths, into the cool of the stableyard, the mingled smells of horse and hay and woodsmoke. A greylark warbled on the edge of the stable roof. Greylarks came even before robins in the spring. Greylarks had been singing in Fal Moran when Edeyn first whispered in his ear.

The horses had already been stabled, bridles and saddles and packsaddle atop saddle blankets on the stall doors, but the wicker hampers were gone. Plainly Mistress Arovni had sent word to the ostlers that he and Bukama were being given accommodation.

There was only a single groom in the dim stable, a lean, hardfaced woman mucking out. Silently she watched him check Cat Dancer and the other horses as she worked, watched him begin to pace the length of the strawcovered floor. He tried to think, but Edeyn's name kept spinning though his head. Edeyn's face, surrounded by silky black hair that hung below her waist, a beautiful face with large dark eyes that could drink a man's soul even when filled with command.

After a bit the groom mumbled something in his direction, touching her lips and forehead, and hurriedly shoved her half-filled barrow out of the stable, glancing over her shoulder at him. She paused to shut the doors, and did that hurriedly, too, sealing him in shadow broken only by a little light from open hay doors in the loft. Dust motes danced in the pale golden shafts.

Lan grimaced. Was she that afraid of a man wearing the *hadori*? Did she think his pacing a threat? Abruptly he became aware of his hands running over the long hilt of his sword, aware of the tightness in his

own face. Pacing? No, he had been in the walking stance called Leopard in High Grass, used when there were enemies on all sides. He needed calm.

Seating himself crosslegged on a bale of straw, he formed the image of a flame in his mind and fed emotion into it, hate, fear, everything, every scrap, until it seemed that he floated in emptiness. After years of practice, achieving *ko'di*, the oneness, needed less than a heartbeat. Thought and even his own body seemed distant, but in this state he was more aware than usual, becoming one with the bale beneath him, the stable, the scabbarded sword folded behind him. He could 'feel' the horses, cropping at their mangers, and flies buzzing in the corners. They were all part of him. Especially the sword. This time, though, it was only the emotionless void that he sought.

From his belt pouch he took a heavy gold signet ring worked with a flying crane and turned it over and over in his fingers. The ring of Malkieri kings, worn by men who had held back the Shadow nine hundred years and more. Countless times it had been remade as time wore it down, always the old ring melted to become part of the new. Some particle might still exist in it of the ring worn by the rulers of Rhamdasha, that had lived before Malkier, and Aramaelle that had been before Rhamdasha. That piece of metal represented over three thousand years fighting the Blight. It had been his almost as long as he had lived, but he had never worn it. Even looking at the ring was a labour, usually. One he disciplined himself to every day. Without the emptiness, he did not think he could have done so today. In *ko'di*, thought floated free, and emotion lay beyond the horizon.

In his cradle he had been given four gifts. The ring in his hands and the locket that hung around his neck, the sword on his hip and an oath sworn in his name. The locket was the most precious, the oath the heaviest. 'To stand against the Shadow so long as iron is hard and stone abides. To defend the Malkieri while one drop of blood remains. To avenge what cannot be defended.' And then he had been anointed with oil and named Dai Shan, consecrated as the next King of Malkier, and sent away from a land that knew it would die. Twenty men began that journey; five survived to reach Shienar.

Nothing remained to be defended now, only a nation to avenge, and he had been trained to that from his first step. With his mother's gift at his throat and his father's sword in his hand, with the ring branded on his heart, he had fought to avenge Malkier from his sixteenth nameday. But never had he led men into the Blight. Bukama had ridden with him, and others, but he would not lead men there. That war was his alone. The dead could not be returned to life, a land any more than a man. Only, now, Edeyn Arrel wanted to try.

Her name echoed in the emptiness within him. A hundred emotions loomed like stark mountains, but he fed them into the flame until all was still. Until his heart beat time with the slow stamping of the stalled horses, and the flies' wings beat rapid counterpoint to his breath. She was his *carneira*, his first lover. A thousand years of tradition shouted that, despite the stillness that enveloped him.

He had been fifteen, Edeyn more than twice that, when she gathered the hair that had still hung to his waist in her hands and whispered her intentions. Women had still called him beautiful then, enjoying his blushes, and for half a year she had enjoyed parading him on her arm and tucking him into her bed. Until Bukama and the other men gave him the *hadori*. The gift of his sword on his tenth nameday had made him a man by custom along the Border, though years early for it, yet among Malkieri, that band of braided leather had been more important. Once that was tied around his head, he alone decided where he went, and when, and why. And the dark song of the Blight had become a howl that drowned every other sound. The oath that had murmured so long in his heart became a dance his feet had to follow.

Almost ten years past now that Edeyn had watched him ride away from Fal Moran, and been gone when he returned, yet he still could recall her face more clearly than that of any woman who had shared his bed since. He was no longer a boy, to think that she loved him just because she had chosen to become his first lover, yet there was an old saying among Malkieri men. *Your carneira wears part of your soul as a ribbon in her hair for ever.* Custom strong as law made it so.

One of the stable doors creaked open to admit Bukama, coatless, shirt tucked raggedly into his breeches. He looked naked without his sword. As if hesitant, he carefully opened both doors wide before coming all the way in. 'What are you going to do?' he said finally. 'Racelle told me about . . . about the Golden Crane.'

Lan tucked the ring away, letting emptiness drain from him. Edeyn's face suddenly seemed everywhere, just beyond the edge of sight. 'Ryne says even Nazar Kurenin is ready to follow,' he said lightly. 'Wouldn't that be a sight to see?' An army could die trying to defeat the Blight. Armies had died trying. But the memories of Malkier already were dying. A nation was memory as much as land. 'That boy at the gates might let his hair

grow and ask his father for the *hadori*.' People were forgetting, trying to forget. When the last man who bound his hair was gone, the last woman who painted her forehead, would Malkier truly be gone, too? 'Why, Ryne might even get rid of those braids.' Any trace of mirth dropped from his voice as he added, 'But is it worth the cost? Some seem to think so.' Bukama snorted, yet there had been a pause. He might be one of those who did.

Striding to the stall that held Sun Lance, the older man began to fiddle with his roan's saddle as though suddenly forgetting why he had moved. 'There's always a cost for anything,' he said, not looking up. 'But there are costs, and costs. The Lady Edeyn. . .' He glanced at Lan, then turned to face him. 'She was always one to demand every right and require the smallest obligation be met. Custom ties strings to you, and whatever you choose, she will use them like a set of reins unless you find a way to avoid it.'

Carefully Lan tucked his thumbs behind his swordbelt. Bukama had carried him out of Malkier tied to his back. The last of the five. Bukama had the right of a free tongue even when it touched Lan's *carneira*. 'How do you suggest I avoid my obligations without shame?' he asked more harshly than he had intended. Taking a deep breath, he went on in a milder tone. 'Come; the common room smells much better than this. Ryne suggested a round of the taverns tonight. Unless Mistress Arovni has claims on you. Oh, yes. How much will our rooms cost? Good rooms? Not too dear, I hope.'

Bukama joined him on the way to the doors, his face going red. 'Not too dear,' he said hastily. 'You have a pallet in the attic, and I . . . ah . . . I'm in Racelle's rooms. I'd like to make a round, but I think Racelle . . . I don't think she means to let me . . . I . . . Young whelp!' he growled. 'There's a lass named Lira in there who's letting it be known you won't be using that pallet tonight, or getting much sleep, so don't think you can -!' He cut off as they walked into the sunlight, bright after the dimness inside. The greylark still sang of spring.

Six men were striding across the otherwise empty yard. Six ordinary men with swords at their belts, like any men on any street in the city. Yet Lan knew before their hands moved, before their eyes focused on him and their steps quickened. He had faced too many men who wanted to kill him not to know. And at his side stood Bukama, bound by oaths that would not let him raise a hand even had he been wearing his blade. If they both tried to get back inside the stable, the men would be on them before they could haul the doors shut. Time slowed, flowed like cool honey.

'Inside and bar the doors!' Lan snapped as his hand went to his hilt. 'Obey me, armsman!'

Never in his life had he given Bukama a command in that fashion, and the man hesitated a heartbeat, then bowed formally. 'My life is yours, Dai Shan,' he said in a thick voice. 'I obey.'

As Lan moved forward to meet his attackers, he heard the bar drop inside with a muffled thud. Relief was distant. He floated in *ko'di*, one with the sword that came smoothly out of its scabbard. One with the men rushing at him, boots thudding on the hard-packed ground as they bared steel.

A lean heron of a fellow darted ahead of the others, and Lan danced the forms. Time like cool honey. The greylark sang, and the lean man shrieked as Cutting the Clouds removed his right hand at the wrist, and Lan flowed to one side so the rest could not all come at him together, flowed from form to form. Soft Rain at Sunset laid open a fat man's face, took his left eye, and a ginger-haired young splinter drew a gash across Lan's ribs with Black Pebbles on Snow. Only in stories did one man face six without injury. The Rose Unfolds sliced down a bald man's left arm, and ginger-hair nicked the corner of Lan's eye. Only in stories did one man face six and survive. He had known that from the start. Duty was a mountain, death a feather, and his duty was to Bukama, who had carried an infant on his back. For this moment he lived, though, so he fought, kicking ginger-hair in the head, dancing his way towards death, danced and took wounds, bled and danced the razor's edge of life. Time like cool honey, flowing from form to form, and there could only be one ending. Thought was distant. Death was a feather. Dandelion in the Wind slashed open the now one-eyed fat man's throat - he had barely paused when his face was ruined - a forkbearded fellow with shoulders like a blacksmith gasped in surprise as Kissing the Adder put Lan's steel through his heart.

And suddenly Lan realized that he alone stood, with six men sprawled across the width of the stableyard. The ginger-haired youth thrashed his heels on the ground one last time, and then only Lan of the seven still breathed. He shook blood from his blade, bent to wipe the last drops off on the blacksmith's too-fine coat, sheathed his sword as formally as if he were in the training yard under Bukama's eye.

Abruptly people flooded out of the inn, cooks and stablemen, maids and patrons shouting to know what all the noise was about, staring at the dead men in astonishment. Ryne was the very first, sword already in hand, his face blank as he came to stand by Lan. 'Six,' he muttered, studying the bodies. 'You really do have the Dark

One's own flaming luck.'

Dark-eyed Lira reached Lan only moments before Bukama, the pair of them gently parting slashes in his clothes to examine his injuries. She shivered delicately as each was revealed, but she discussed whether an Aes Sedai should be sent for to give Healing and how much stitching was needed in as calm a tone as Bukama, and disparagingly dismissed his hand on the needle in favour of her own. Mistress Arovi stalked about, holding her skirts up out of patches of bloody mud, glaring at the corpses littering her stableyard, complaining in a loud voice that gangs of footpads would never be wandering in daylight if the Watch was doing its job. The Domani woman who had stared at Lan inside agreed just as loudly, and for her pains received a sharp command from the innkeeper to fetch them, along with a shove to start her on her way. It was a measure of Mistress Arovi's shock that she treated one of her patrons so, a measure of everyone's shock that the Domani woman went running without complaint. The innkeeper began organizing men to drag the bodies out of sight, still going on about footpads.

Ryne looked from Bukama to the stable as though he did not understand - perhaps he did not, at that - but what he said was, 'Not footpads, I think.' He pointed to the fellow who looked like a blacksmith. 'That one listened to Edeyn Arrel when she was here, and he liked what he heard. One of the others did, too, I think.' Bells chimed as he shook his head. 'It's peculiar. The first she said of raising the Golden Crane was after we heard you were dead outside the Shining Walls. Your name brings men, but with you dead, she could be el'Edeyn.' He spread his hands at the looks Lan and Bukama shot him. 'I make no accusations,' he said hastily. 'I'd never accuse the Lady Edeyn of any such thing. I'm sure she is full of all a woman's tender mercy.' Mistress Arovi gave a grunt like a fist, and Lira murmured half under her breath that the pretty Arafellin did not know much about women.

Lan shook his head. Edeyn might decide to have him killed if it suited her purposes, she might have left orders here and there in case the rumours about him proved false, but if she had, that was still no reason to speak her name in connection with this, especially in front of strangers.

Bukama's hands stilled, holding open a slash down Lan's sleeve. 'Where do we go from here?' he asked quietly.

'Chachin,' Lan said after a moment. There was always a choice, but sometimes every choice was grim. 'You'll have to leave Sun Lance. I mean to depart at first light tomorrow.' His gold would stretch to a new mount for the man.

'Six!' Ryne growled, sheathing his sword with considerable force. 'I think I'll ride with you. I'd as soon not go back to Shol Arbela until I'm sure Ceiline Noreman doesn't lay her husband's death at my boots. And it will be good to see the Golden Crane flying again.'

Lan nodded. To put his hand on the banner and abandon what he had promised himself all those years ago, or to stop her, if he could. Either way, he had to face Edeyn. The Blight would have been much easier.

Chasing after prophecy, Moiraine had decided by the end of the first month, involved very little adventure and a great deal of saddlesoreness and frustration. The Three Oaths still made her skin feel too tight. The wind rattled the shutters, and she shifted on the hard wooden chair, hiding impatience behind a sip of honeyless tea. In Kandor, comforts were kept to a minimum in a house of mourning. She would not have been overly surprised to see frost on the leaf-carved furniture or the metal clock above the cold hearth.

'It was all so strange, my Lady,' Mistress Najima sighed, and for the tenth time hugged her daughters. Perhaps thirteen or fourteen, standing close to their mother's chair, Colar and Eselle had her long black hair and large blue eyes still full of loss. Their mother's eyes seemed big, too, in a face shrunken by tragedy, and her plain grey dress appeared made for a larger woman. 'Josef was always careful with lanterns in the stable,' she went on, 'and he never allowed any kind of open flame. The boys must have carried little Jerid out to see their father at his work, and. . . 'Another hollow sigh. 'They were all trapped. How could the whole stable be ablaze so fast? It makes no sense.'

'Little is ever senseless,' Moiraine said soothingly, setting her cup on the small table at her elbow. She felt sympathy, but the woman had begun repeating herself. 'We cannot always see the reason, yet we can take some comfort in knowing there is one. The Wheel of Time weaves us into the Pattern as it wills, but the Pattern is the work of the Light.'

Hearing herself, she suppressed a wince. Those words required dignity and weight her youth failed to

supply. If only time could pass faster. At least for the next five years or so. Five years should give her her full strength and provide all the dignity and weight she would ever need. But then, the agelessness that came after working long enough with the One Power would only have made her present task more difficult. The last thing she could afford was anyone connecting an Aes Sedai to her visits.

'As you say, my Lady,' the other woman murmured politely, though an unguarded shift of pale eyes spoke her thoughts. This outlander was a foolish child. The small blue stone of a kesiera dangling from a fine golden chain on to Moiraine's forehead and a dark green dress with six slashes of colour across the breast, far fewer than she was entitled to, made Mistress Najima think her merely a Cairhienin noblewoman, one of many wandering since the Aiel ruined Cairhien. A noblewoman of a minor House, named Alys not Moiraine, making sympathy calls in mourning for her own king, killed by the Aiel. The fiction was easy to maintain, though she did not mourn her uncle in the least.

Perhaps sensing that her thoughts had been too clear, Mistress Najima started up again, speaking quickly. 'It's just that Josef was always so lucky, my Lady. Everyone spoke of it. They said if Josef Najima fell down a hole, there'd be opals at the bottom. When he answered the Lady Kareil's call to go fight the Aiel, I worried, but he never took a scratch. When camp fever struck, it never touched us or the children. Josef gained the Lady's favour without trying. Then it seemed the Light truly did shine on us. Jerid was born safe and whole, and the war ended, all in a matter of days, and when we came home to Canluum, the Lady gave us the livery stable for Josef's service, and . . . and . . .' She swallowed tears she would not shed. Colar began to weep, and her mother pulled her closer, whispering comfort.

Moiraine rose. More repetition. There was nothing here for her. Jurine stood, too, not a tall woman, yet almost a hand taller than she. Either of the girls could look her in the eyes. She had grown accustomed to that since leaving Cairhien. Forcing herself to take time, she murmured more condolences and tried to press a washleather purse on the woman as the girls brought her fur-lined cloak and gloves. A small purse. Obtaining coin meant visits to the bankers and a clear trail. Not that the Aiel had left her estates in a condition to provide much money for some years yet. And not that anyone was likely to be looking for her. Still, discovery might be decidedly unpleasant.

The woman's stiff-necked refusal to take the purse irritated Moiraine. No, that was not the real reason. She understood pride, and besides, Lady Kareil had provided. The real irritant was her own desire to be gone. Jurine Najima had lost her husband and three sons in one fiery morning, but her Jerid had been born in the wrong place by almost twenty miles. The search continued. Moiraine did not like feeling relief in connection with the death of an infant. Yet she did.

Outside under a grey sky, she gathered her cloak tightly. Ignoring the cold was a simple trick, but anyone who went about the streets of Canluum with open cloak would draw stares. Any outlander, at least, unless clearly Aes Sedai. Besides, not allowing the cold to touch you did not make you unaware of it. How these people could call this 'new spring' without a hint of mockery was beyond her.

Despite the near freezing wind that gusted over the rooftops, the winding streets were packed, requiring her to pick her way through a milling mass of people and carts and wagons. The world had certainly come to Canluum. A Taraboner with heavy moustaches pushed past her muttering a hasty apology, and an olive-skinned Altaran woman who scowled at Moiraine, then an Illianer with a beard that left his upper lip bare, a very pretty fellow and not too tall.

Another day she might have enjoyed the sight of him, in another city. Now, he barely registered. It was women she watched, especially those well-dressed, in silks or fine woollens. If only so many were not veiled. Twice she saw Aes Sedai strolling through the crowds, neither a woman she had ever met. Neither glanced in her direction, but she kept her head down and stayed to the other side of the street. Perhaps she should put on a veil. A stout woman brushed by, features blurred behind lace. Sierin Vayu herself could have passed unrecognized at ten feet in one of those.

Moiraine shivered at the thought, ridiculous as it was. If the new Amyrlin learned what she was up to . . . Inserting herself into secret plans, unbidden and unannounced, would not go unpunished. No matter that the Amyrlin who had made them was dead in her sleep and another woman sat on the Amyrlin Seat. Being sequestered on a farm until the search was done was the least she could expect.

It was not just. She and her friend Siuan had helped gather the names, in the guise of offering assistance to any woman who had given birth during the days when the Aiel threatened Tar Valon itself. Of all the women

involved in that gathering, just they two knew the real reason. They had winnowed those names for Tamra. Only children born outside the city's walls had really been important, though the promised aid went to every woman found, of course. Only boys born on the west bank of the River Erinin, boys who might have been born on the slopes of Dragonmount.

Behind her a woman shouted shrilly, angrily, and Moiraine jumped a foot before she realized it was a wagon-driver, brandishing her whip at a hawker to hustle his pushcart of steaming meat pies out of her way. Light! A farm was the least she could expect! A few men around Moiraine laughed raucously at her leap, and one, a dark-faced Tairen in a striped cloak, made a rude joke about the cold wind curling under her skirts. The laughter grew.

Moiraine stalked ahead stiffly, cheeks crimson, hand tight on the silver hilt of her beltknife. Unthinking, she embraced the True Source, and the One Power flooded her with joyous life. A single glance over her shoulder was all she needed; with *saidar* in her, smells became sharper, colours truer. She could have counted the threads in the cloak the Tairen was letting flap while he laughed. She channelled fine flows of the Power, of Air, and the fellow's baggy breeches dropped to his turned-down boots, the laces undone. Bellowing, he snatched his cloak around him amid gales of renewed mirth. Let him see how *he* liked cold breezes and rowdy jokes!

Satisfaction lasted as long as it took to release the Source. Impetuous impulse and a quick temper had always been her downfall. Any woman able to channel would have seen her weaving if close enough, seen the glow of *saidar* surround her. Even those thin flows could have been felt at thirty paces by the weakest sister in the Tower. A fine way to hide.

Quickening her step, she put distance between herself and the incident. Too little too late, but all she could do now. She stroked the small book in her belt pouch, tried to focus on her task. With only one hand, keeping her cloak closed proved impossible. It whipped about in the wind, and after a moment, she let herself feel the knifing chill. Sisters who took on penances at every turn were foolish, yet a penance could serve many purposes, and maybe she needed a reminder. If she could not remember to be careful, she might as well return to the White Tower now and ask where to start hoeing turnips.

Mentally she drew a line through the name of Jurine Najima. Other names in the book already had real lines inked through them. The mothers of five boys born in the wrong place. The mothers of three girls. An army of almost two hundred thousand men had gathered to face the Aiel outside the Shining Walls, and it still astonished her how many women followed along, how many were with child. An older sister had had to explain. The war had not been short, and men who knew they might die tomorrow wanted to leave part of themselves behind. Women who knew their men might die tomorrow wanted that part of them to keep.

Hundreds had given birth during the key ten days, and in that sort of gathering, with soldiers from nearly every land, too often there was only rumour as to exactly where or when a child had been born. Or to where the parents had gone, with the war ended and the Coalition army melting away along with the Coalition. There were too many entries like 'Saera Deosin. Husband Eadwin. From Murandy. A son?' A whole country to search, only a pair of names to go by, and no certainty the woman had borne a boy. Too many like 'Kari al'Thor. From Andor? Husband Tamlin, Second Captain of the Illianer Companions, took discharge.' That pair might have gone anywhere in the world, and there was doubt she had had a child at all. Sometimes only the mother was listed, with six or eight variations on the name of a home village that might lie in one of two or three countries. The list of those easy to find was growing shorter rapidly.

But the child had to be found. An infant who would grow to manhood and wield the tainted male half of the One Power. Moiraine shuddered at the thought despite herself. That was why this search was so secret, why Moiraine and Sivan, still only Accepted when they learned of the child's birth by accident, had been shunted aside and kept in as much ignorance as Tamra could manage. This was a matter for experienced sisters. But who could she trust with the news that the birth of the Dragon Reborn had been Foretold, and more, that somewhere he already suckled at his mother's breast? Had she had the sort of nightmares that had wakened Moiraine and Sivan so many nights? Yet this boychild would grow to manhood and save the world, so the Prophecies of the Dragon said. If he was not found by a Red sister; the Red Ajah's main purpose was hunting down men who could channel, and Moiraine was sure Tamra had not trusted any of them, even with a child. Could a Red be trusted to remember that he would be humankind's salvation while remembering what else he would be? The day suddenly seemed colder to Moiraine, for remembering.

The inn where she had a small room was called The Gates of Heaven, four sprawling storeys of green-roofed stone, Canluum's best and largest. Nearby shops catered to the lords and ladies on the Stand, looming behind the inn. She would not have stopped in it had there been another room to be found in the city. Taking a deep breath, she hurried inside. Neither the sudden warmth from fires on four large hearths nor the good smells of cooking from the kitchens eased her tight shoulders.

The common room was large, and every table beneath the bright red ceiling beams was taken. By plainly-dressed merchants for the most part, and a sprinkling of well-to-do craftsfolk with rich embroidery covering colourful shirts or dresses. She hardly noticed them. No fewer than five sisters were staying at The Gates of Heaven, and all sat in the common room when she walked in. Master Helvin, the innkeeper, would always make room for an Aes Sedai even when he had to force other patrons to double up. The sisters kept to themselves, barely acknowledging one another, and people who might not have recognized an Aes Sedai on sight knew them now, knew enough not to intrude. Every other table was jammed, yet where any man sat with an Aes Sedai, it was her Warder, a hard-eyed man with a dangerous look about him however ordinary he might seem otherwise. One of the sisters sitting alone was a Red; Reds took no Warder.

Tucking her gloves behind her belt and folding her cloak over her arm, Moiraine started towards the stone stairs at the back of the room. Not too quickly, but not dawdling, either. Looking straight ahead. She did not need to see an ageless face or glimpse the golden serpent biting its own tail encircling a finger to know when she passed close to another sister. Each time, she felt the other woman's ability to channel, felt her strength. No one here matched her. She could sense their ability, and they could sense hers. Their eyes following her seemed the touch of fingers. Not quite grasping. None spoke to her.

Then, just as she reached the staircase, a woman did speak behind her. 'Well, now. This is a surprise.'

Turning quickly, Moiraine kept her face smooth with an effort as she made a brief curtsy suitable for a minor noblewoman to an Aes Sedai. To two Aes Sedai. She did not think she could have encountered two worse than this pair in sober silks.

The white wings in Larelle Tarsi's long hair emphasized her serene, copper-skinned elegance. She had taught Moiraine in several classes, as both novice and Accepted, and she had a way of asking the last question you wanted to hear. Worse was Merean Redhill, plump and so motherly that hair more grey than not, and gathered at the nape of her neck, almost submerged the agelessness of her features. She had been Mistress of Novices under Tamra, and she made Larelle seem blind when it came to discovering just what you most wanted to hide. Both wore their vine-embroidered shawls, Merean's fringed blue. Blue was Moiraine's Ajah, too. That might count for something. Or not. It was a surprise to see them together; she had not thought they particularly liked one another.

Both were stronger in the Power than she, unfortunately, though she would stand above them eventually, but the gap was only wide enough that she had to defer, not obey. In any case, they had no right to interfere in anything she might be doing. Custom held very strongly on that. Unless they were part of Tamra's search and had been told about her. An Amyrlin's commands superseded the strongest custom, or at least altered it. But if either said the wrong thing here, word that Moiraine Damodred was wandering about in disguise would spread with the sisters in the room, and it would reach the wrong ears as surely as peaches were poison. That was the way of the world. A summons back to Tar Valon would find her soon after. She opened her mouth hoping to forestall the chance, but someone else spoke first.

'No need trying that one,' a sister alone at a table nearby said, twisting around on her bench. Felaana Bevaine, a slim yellow-haired Brown with a raspy voice, had been the first to corner Moiraine when she arrived. 'Says she has no interest in going to the Tower. Stubborn as stone about it. Secretive, too. You would think we'd have heard about a wilder popping up in even a lesser Cairhienin House, but this child likes to keep to herself.'

Larelle and Merean looked at Moiraine, Larelle arching a thin eyebrow, Merean apparently trying to suppress a smile. Most sisters disliked wilders, women who managed to survive teaching themselves to channel without going to the White Tower.

'It is quite true, Aes Sedai,' Moiraine said carefully, relieved that someone else had laid a foundation. 'I have no desire to enroll as a novice, and I will not.'

Felaana fixed her with considering eyes, but she still spoke to the others. 'Says she's twenty-two, but that rule has been bent a time or two. A woman says she's eighteen, and that's how she's enrolled. Unless it's too

obvious a lie, anyway, and this girl -'

'Our rules were not made to be broken,' Larelle said sharply, and Merean added in a wry voice, 'I don't believe this young woman will lie about her age. She doesn't want to be a novice, Felaana. Let her go her way.' Moiraine almost let out a relieved sigh.

Enough weaker than they to accept being cut off, Felaana still began to rise, plainly meaning to continue the argument. Halfway to her feet she glanced up the stairs behind Moiraine, her eyes widened, and abruptly she sat down again, focusing on her plate of black peas and onions as if nothing else in the world existed. Merean and Larelle gathered their shawls, grey fringe and blue swaying. They looked eager to be elsewhere. They looked as though their feet had been nailed to the floor.

'So this girl does not want to be a novice,' said a woman's voice from the stairs. A voice Moiraine had heard only once, two years ago, and would never forget. A number of women were stronger than she, but only one could be as much stronger as this one. Unwillingly, she looked over her shoulder.

Nearly black eyes studied her from beneath a bun of iron-grey hair decorated with golden ornaments, stars and birds, crescent moons and fish. Cadsuane, too, wore her shawl, fringed in green. 'In my opinion, girl,' she said drily, 'you could profit from ten years in white.'

Everyone had believed Cadsuane Melaidhrin dead somewhere in retirement until she reappeared at the start of the Aiel War, and a good many sisters probably wished her truly in her grave. Cadsuane was a legend, a most uncomfortable thing to have alive and staring at you. Half the tales about her came close to impossibility, while the rest were beyond it, even among those that had proof. A long-ago King of Tarabon winkled out of his palace when it was learned he could channel, carried to Tar Valon to be gentled while an army that did not believe chased after to attempt rescue. A King of Arad Doman and a Queen of Saldaea *both* kidnapped, spirited away in secrecy, and when Cadsuane finally released them, a war that had seemed certain simply faded away. It was said she bent Tower law where it suited her, flouted custom, went her own way and often dragged others with her.

'I thank the Aes Sedai for her concern,' Moiraine began, then trailed off under that stare. Not a hard stare. Simply implacable. Supposedly even Amyrlins had stepped warily around Cadsuane over the years. It was whispered that she had actually *assaulted* an Amyrlin, once. Impossible, of course; she would have been executed! Moiraine swallowed and tried to start over, only to find she wanted to swallow again.

Descending the stair, Cadsuane told Merean and Larelle, 'Bring the girl.' Without a second glance, she glided across the common room. Merchants and craftsfolk looked at her, some openly, some from the corner of an eye, and Warders too, but every sister kept her gaze on her table.

Merean's face tightened, and Larelle sighed extravagantly, yet they prodded Moiraine after the bobbing golden ornaments. She had no choice but to go. At least Cadsuane could not be one of the women Tamra had called in; she had not returned to Tar Valon since that visit at the beginning of the war.

Cadsuane led them to one of the inn's private sitting rooms, where a fire blazed on the black stone hearth and silver lamps hung along the red wall panels. A tall pitcher stood near the fire to keep warm, and a lacquered tray on a small carved table held silver cups. Merean and Larelle took two of the brightly-cushioned chairs, but when Moiraine put her cloak on a chair and started to sit, Cadsuane pointed to a spot in front of the other sisters. 'Stand there, child,' she said.

Making an effort not to clutch her skirt in her fists, Moiraine stood as directed. Obedience had always been difficult for her. Until she went to the Tower at sixteen, there had been few people she had to obey. Most obeyed her.

Cadsuane circled the three of them slowly, once, twice. Merean and Larelle exchanged wondering frowns, and Larelle opened her mouth, but after one look at Cadsuane, closed it again. They assumed smooth-faced serenity; any watcher would have thought they knew exactly what was going on. Sometimes Cadsuane glanced at them, but the greater part of her attention stayed on Moiraine.

'Most new sisters,' the legendary Green said abruptly, 'hardly remove their shawls to sleep or bathe, but here you are without shawl or ring, in one of the most dangerous spots you could choose short of the Blight itself. Why?'

Moiraine blinked. A direct question. The woman really did ignore custom when it suited her. She made her voice light. 'New sisters also seek a Warder.' Why was the woman singling her out in this manner? 'I have not bonded mine, yet. I am told Bordermen make fine Warders.' The Green sent her a stabbing look that made

her wish she had been just a little less light.

Stopping behind Larelle, Cadsuane laid a hand on her shoulder. 'What do you know of this child?'

Every girl in Larelle's classes had thought her the perfect sister and been intimidated by that cool consideration. They all had been afraid of her, and wanted to be her. 'Moiraine was studious and a quick learner,' she said thoughtfully. 'She and Siuan Sanche were two of the quickest the Tower has ever seen. But you must know that. Let me see. She was rather too free with her opinions, and her temper, until we settled her down. As much as we did settle her. She and the Sanche girl had a continuing fondness for pranks. But they both passed for Accepted on the first try, and for the shawl. She needs seasoning, of course, yet she may make something of herself.'

Cadsuane moved behind Merean, asking the same question, adding, 'A fondness for . . . pranks, Larelle said. A troublesome child?'

Merean shook her head with a smile. None of the girls had wanted to be Merean, but everyone knew where to go for a shoulder to cry on or advice when you could not ask your closest friend. Many more girls visited her on their own than had been sent for chastisement. 'Not troublesome, really,' she said. 'High-spirited. None of the tricks Moiraine played were mean, but they were plentiful. Novice and Accepted, she was sent to my study more often than any three other girls. Except for her pillow-friend Siuan. Of course, pillow-friends frequently get into tangles together, but with those two, one was never sent to me without the other. The last time the very night after passing for the shawl.' Her smile faded into a frown very much like the one she had worn that night. Not angry, but rather disbelieving of the mischief young women could get up to. And a touch amused by it. 'Instead of spending the night in contemplation, they tried to sneak mice into a sister's bed - Elaida a'Roihan - and were caught. I doubt any other women have been raised Aes Sedai while still too tender to sit from their last visit to the Mistress of Novices. Once the Three Oaths tightened on them, they needed cushions a week.'

Moiraine kept her face smooth, kept her hands from knotting into fists, but she could do nothing about burning cheeks. That ruefully amused frown, as if she were still Accepted. She needed seasoning, did she? Well, perhaps she did, some, but still. And spreading out all these intimacies!

'I think you know all of me that you need to know,' she told Cadsuane stiffly. How close she and Siuan had been was no one's business but theirs. And their punishments, *details* of their punishments. Elaida had been hateful, always pressing, demanding perfection whenever she visited the Tower. 'If you are quite satisfied, I must pack my things. I am departing for Chachin.'

She swallowed a groan before it could form. She still let her tongue go too free when her temper was up. If Merean or Larelle was part of the search, they must have at least part of the list in her little book. Including Jurine Najima here, the Lady Ines Demain in Chachin, and Avene Sahera, who lived in 'a village on the high road between Chachin and Canluum'. To strengthen suspicion, all she need do now was say she intended to spend time in Arafel and Shienar next.

Cadsuane smiled, not at all pleasantly. 'You'll leave when I say, child. Be silent till you're spoken to. That pitcher should hold spiced wine. Pour for us.'

Moiraine quivered. Child! She was no longer a novice. The woman could not order her coming and going. Or her tongue. But she did not protest. She walked to the hearth - stalked, really - and picked up the long-necked silver pitcher.

'You seem very interested in this young woman, Cadsuane,' Merean said, turning slightly to watch Moiraine pour. 'Is there something about her we should know?'

Larelle's smile held a touch of mockery. Only a touch, with Cadsuane. 'Has someone Foretold she'll be Amyrlin one day? I can't say that I see it in her, but then, I don't have the Foretelling.'

'I might live another thirty years,' Cadsuane said, putting out a hand for the cup Moiraine offered, 'or only three. Who can say?'

Moiraine's eyes went wide, and she slopped hot wine over her own wrist. Merean gasped, and Larelle looked as though she had been struck in the forehead with a stone. Any Aes Sedai would spit on the table before referring to another sister's age or her own. Except that Cadsuane was not any Aes Sedai.

'A little more care with the other cups,' she said, unperturbed by all the gaping. 'Child?' Moiraine returned to the hearth still staring, and Cadsuane went on, 'Meilyn is considerably older. When she and I are gone, that leaves Kerene the strongest.' Larelle flinched. 'Am I disturbing you?' Cadsuane's solicitous tone could

not have been more false, and she did not wait for an answer. 'Holding our silence about age doesn't keep people from knowing we live longer than they. Phaaw! From Kerene, it's a sharp drop to the next five. Five once this child and the Sanche girl reach their potential. And one of those is as old as I am and in retirement to boot.'

'Is there some point to this?' Merean asked, sounding a little sick. Larelle pressed her hands against her middle, her face grey. They barely glanced at the wine Moiraine offered before gesturing it away, and she kept the cup, though she did not think she could swallow a mouthful.

Cadsuane scowled, a fearsome sight. 'No one has come to the Tower in a thousand years who could match me. No one to match Meilyn or Kerene in almost six hundred. A thousand years ago, there would have been fifty sisters or more who stood higher than this child. In another hundred years, though, she'll stand in the first rank. Oh, someone stronger may be found in that time, but there won't be fifty, and there may be none. We dwindle.'

'I don't understand,' Larelle said sharply. She seemed to have gathered herself, and to be angry for her previous weakness. 'We are all aware of the problem, but what does Moiraine have to do with it? Do you think she can somehow make more girls come to the Tower, girls with stronger potential?' Her snort said what she thought of that.

'I would regret her being wasted before she knows up from down. The Tower can't afford to lose her out of her own ignorance. Look at her. A pretty little doll of a Cairhien noble.' Cadsuane put a finger under Moiraine's chin, tilting it up. 'Before you find a Warder like that, child, a brigand who wants to see what's in your purse will put an arrow through your heart. A footpad who'd faint at the sight of a sister in her sleep will crack your head, and you'll wake at the back of an alley minus your gold and maybe more. I suspect you'll want to take as much care choosing your first man as you do your first Warder.'

Moiraine jerked back, spluttered with indignation. First her and Suan, now this. There were things one talked about, and things one did not!

Cadsuane ignored her outrage. Calmly sipping her wine, she turned back to the others. 'Until she does find a Warder to guard her back, it might be best to protect her from her own enthusiasm. You two are going to Chachin, I believe. She'll travel with you, then. I expect you not to let her out of your sight.'

Moiraine found her tongue, but her protests did as much good as her indignation had. Merean and Larelle objected, too, just as vociferously. Aes Sedai did not need 'looking after', no matter how new. They had interests of their own to look after. They did not make clear what those were - few sisters would have - but they plainly wanted no company. Cadsuane paid no attention to anything she did not want to hear, assumed they would do as she wished, pressed wherever they offered an opening. Soon the pair were twisting on their chairs and reduced to saying that they had only encountered each other the day before and were not sure they would be travelling on together. In any event, both meant to spend two or three days in Canluum, while Moiraine wanted to leave today.

'The child will stay until you leave,' Cadsuane said briskly. 'Good; that's done, then. I'm sure you two want to see to whatever brought you to Canluum. I won't keep you.'

Larelle shifted her shawl irritably at the abrupt dismissal, then stalked out muttering that Moiraine would regret it if she got underfoot or slowed her reaching Chachin. Merean took it better, even saying she would look after Moiraine like a daughter, though her smile hardly looked pleased.

When they were gone, Moiraine stared at Cadsuane incredulously. She had never seen anything like it. Except an avalanche, once. The thing to do now was keep silent until she had a chance to leave without Cadsuane or the others seeing. Much the wisest thing. 'I agreed to nothing,' she said coolly. Very coolly. 'What if I have affairs in Chachin that will not wait? What if I do not choose to wait here two or three days?' Perhaps she did need to learn to school her tongue a little more.

Cadsuane had been looking thoughtfully at the door that had closed behind Merean and Larelle, but she turned a piercing gaze on Moiraine. 'You've worn the shawl five months, and you have affairs that cannot wait? Phaaw! You still haven't learned the first real lesson, that the shawl means you are ready to truly begin learning. The second lesson is caution. I know very well how hard that is to find when you're young and have saidar at your fingertips and the world at your feet. As you think.' Moiraine tried to fit a word in, but she might as well have stood in front of that avalanche. 'You will take great risks in your life, if you live long enough. You already take more than you know. Heed carefully what I say. And do as I say. I will check your bed tonight, and

if you are not in it, I will find you and make you weep as you did for those mice. You can dry your tears afterwards on that shawl you believe makes you invincible. It does not.'

Staring as the door closed behind Cadsuane, Moiraine suddenly realized she still held the cup of wine and gulped it dry. The woman was . . . formidable. Custom forbade physical violence against another sister, but Cadsuane had not sidestepped a hair in her threat. She had said it right out, so by the Three Oaths she meant it exactly. Incredible. Was it happenstance that she had mentioned Meilyn Arganya and Kerene Nagashi? They were two of Tamra's searchers. *Could* Cadsuane be another? Either way, she had very neatly cut Moiraine out of the hunt for the next week or more. If she actually went with Merean and Larelle, at least. But why only a week? If the woman was part of the search . . . If Cadsuane knew about her and Suan . . . If . . . Standing there fiddling with an empty wine-cup was getting her nowhere. She snatched up her cloak.

A number of people looked around at her when she came out into the common room, some with sympathy in their eyes. Doubtless they were imagining what it must be like to be the focus of attention for three Aes Sedai, and they could not imagine any good in it. There was no commiseration on any sister's face. Felaana wore a pleased smile; she probably thought the Lady Alys's name as good as written in the novice book. Cadsuane was nowhere in sight, nor the other two.

Picking her way through the tables, Moiraine felt shaken. There were too many questions, and not an answer to be found. She wished Suan was there; Suan was very good at puzzles, and nothing shook her.

A young woman looked in at the door from the street, then jerked out of sight, and Moiraine missed a step. Wish for something hard enough, and you could think you saw it. The woman peeked in again, the hood of her cloak fallen atop the bundle on her back, and it really was Suan, sturdy and handsome, in a plain blue dress that showed signs of hard travel. This time she saw Moiraine, but instead of rushing to greet her, Suan nodded up the street and vanished again.

Heart climbing into her throat, Moiraine swept her cloak around her and went out. Down the street, Suan was slipping through the traffic, glancing back at every third step. Moiraine followed quickly, worry growing.

Suan was supposed to be six hundred miles away in Tar Valon, working for Cetalia Delarme, who ran the Blue Ajah's network of eyes-and-ears. She had let that secret slip while bemoaning her fate. The whole time they were novice and Accepted together Suan had talked of getting out into the world, seeing the world, but Cetalia had taken her aside the day they received the shawl, and by that evening Suan was sorting reports from men and women scattered through the nations. She had a mind that saw patterns others missed. Cetalia equalled Merean in the Power, and it would be another three or four years before Suan gained enough strength to tell Cetalia she was leaving the job. There would be snow at Sunday before Cetalia let her go short of that. And the only other possibility for her being in Canluum . . . Moiraine groaned, and when a big-eared fellow selling pins from a tray gave her a concerned look, she glared so hard that he started back.

It would be just like Sierin to send Suan to bring her back, so their worry could feed on each other during the long ride. Sierin was a hard woman, without an ounce of mercy. An Amyrlin was supposed to grant indulgences and relief from penances on the day she was raised; Sierin had ordered two sisters birched and exiled three from the Tower for a year. She might well have told Suan the penance she intended to impose. Moiraine shivered. Likely, Sierin would manage to combine Labour, Deprivation, Mortification of the Flesh, *and* Mortification of the Spirit.

A hundred paces from the inn, Suan looked back once more, paused till she was sure that Moiraine saw her, then darted into an alley. Moiraine quickened her stride and followed.

Her friend was pacing beneath the still-unlit oil-lamps that lined even this narrow, dusty passage. Nothing frightened Suan Sanche, a fisherman's daughter from the toughest quarter in Tear, but fear glittered in those sharp blue eyes now. Moiraine opened her mouth to confirm her own fears about Sierin, but the taller woman spoke first.

'Tell me you've found him, Moiraine. Tell me the Najima boy's the one, and we can hand him to the Tower with a hundred sisters watching, and it's done.'

A hundred sisters? 'No, Suan.' This did not sound like Sierin. 'What is the matter?'

Suan began to weep. Suan, who had a lion's heart and had never let a tear fall until after they left Merean's study. Throwing her arms around Moiraine, she squeezed hard. She was trembling. 'They're all dead,' she mumbled. 'Aisha and Kerene, Valera and Ludice and Meilyn. They say Aisha and her Warder were killed

by bandits in Murandy. Kerene supposedly fell off a ship in the Alguenya during a storm and drowned. And Meilyn . . . Meilyn . . .'

Moiraine hugged her, making soothing sounds. And staring past Sivan's shoulder in consternation. They had learned five of the women Tamra had selected, and all five were dead. 'Meilyn was . . . hardly young,' she said slowly. She was not sure she could have said it at all if Cadsuane had not spoken so openly. Sivan gave a startled jerk, and she made herself go on. 'Neither were any of the others, even Kerene.' Close to two hundred was not young even for Aes Sedai. 'And accidents do happen. Bandits. Storms.' She was having a hard time making herself believe. *All* of them?

Sivan pushed herself away. 'You don't understand. Meilyn!' Grimacing, she scrubbed at her eyes. 'Fish guts! I'm not making this clear. Get hold of yourself, you bloody fool!' That last was growled to herself. Merean and others had gone to a great deal of trouble to clean up Sivan's language, but she had reverted the moment the shawl was on her shoulders. Guiding Moiraine to an upended cask with no bung, she sat her down. 'You won't want to be standing when you hear what I have to say. For that matter, I bloody well don't want to be standing myself.'

Dragging a crate with broken slats from further up the alley, she settled on it, fussing with her skirts, peering towards the street, muttering about people looking in as they passed. Her reluctance did little to soothe Moiraine's stomach. It seemed to do little for Sivan's, either. When she started up again, she kept pausing to swallow, like a woman who wanted to sick up.

'Meilyn returned to the Tower almost a month ago. I don't know why. She didn't say where she had been, or where she was going, but she only meant to stay a few nights. I . . . I'd heard about Kerene the morning Meilyn came, and the others before that. So I decided to speak to her. Don't look at me that way! I know how to be cautious!' Cautious was a word Moiraine had never thought to apply to Sivan. 'Anyway, I sneaked into her rooms and hid under the bed. So the servants wouldn't see me when they turned down her sheets.' Sivan grunted sourly. 'I fell asleep under there. Sunrise woke me, and her bed hadn't been slept in. So I sneaked out and went down to the second sitting of breakfast. And while I was spooning my porridge, Chesmal Emry came in to . . . She . . . She announced that Meilyn had been found in her bed, that she'd died during the night.' She finished in a rush and sagged, staring at Moiraine.

Moiraine was very glad to be sitting. Her knees would not have supported a feather. She had grown up amid *Daes Dae'mar*, the scheming and plotting that dominated Cairhienin life, the shades of meaning in every word, every action. There was too much here for shadings. Murder had been done. 'The Red Ajah?' she suggested finally. A Red might kill a sister she thought intended to protect a man who could channel.

Sivan snorted. 'Meilyn didn't have a mark on her, and Chesmal would have detected poison, or smothering, or . . . That means the Power, Moiraine. Could even a Red do that?' Her voice was fierce, but she pulled the bundle around from her back, clutching it on her lap. She seemed to be hiding behind it. Still, there was less fear on her face than anger, now. 'Think, Moiraine. Tamra supposedly died in her sleep, too. Only we know Meilyn didn't, no matter where she was found. First Tamra, then the others started dying. The only thing that makes sense is that someone noticed her calling sisters in and wanted to know why badly enough that they bloody risked putting the Amyrlin Seat herself to the question. They had to have something to hide to do that, something they'd risk anything to keep hidden. They killed her to hide it, to hide what they'd done, and then they set out to kill the rest. Which means they don't want the boy found, not alive. They don't want the Dragon Reborn at the Last Battle. Any other way to look at it is tossing the slop bucket into the wind and hoping for the best.'

Unconsciously, Moiraine peered towards the mouth of the alley. A few people walking by glanced in, but none more than once. No one paused at seeing them seated there. Some things were easier to speak of when you were not too specific. 'The Amyrlin' had been put to the question; 'she' had been killed. Not Tamra, not a name that brought up the familiar, determined face. 'Someone' had murdered her. 'They' did not want the Dragon Reborn found. Murder with the Power certainly violated the Three Oaths, even for . . . for those Moiraine did not want to name any more than Sivan did.

Forcing her face to smoothness, forcing her voice to calm, she forced the words out. 'The Black Ajah.' Sivan flinched, then nodded, glowering.

Any sister grew angry at the suggestion there was a secret Ajah hidden inside the others, dedicated to the Dark One. Most sisters refused to listen. The White Tower had stood for the Light for over three thousand

years. But some sisters did not deny the Black straight out. Some believed. Very few would admit it even to another sister, though. Moiraine did not want to admit it to herself.

Siu'an plucked at the ties on her bundle, but she went on in a brisk voice. 'I don't think they have our names - Tamra never really thought us part of it - else I'd have had an "accident", too. Just before I left, I slipped a note with my suspicions under Sierin's door. Only, I didn't know how much to trust her. The Amyrlin Seat! I wrote with my left hand, but I was shaking so hard, no one could recognize my writing if I'd used my right. Burn my liver! Even if we knew who to trust, we have bilge water for proof.'

'Enough for me. If they know everything, all the women Tamra chose, there may be none left except us. We will have to move fast if we have a hope of finding the boy first.' Moiraine tried for a vigorous tone, too. It was gratifying that Siu'an only nodded. She would not give up for all her talk of shaking, and she never considered that Moiraine might. Most gratifying. 'Perhaps they know us, and perhaps not. Perhaps they think they can leave two new sisters for last. In any case, we cannot trust anyone but ourselves.' Blood drained from her face. 'Oh, Light! I just had an encounter at the inn, Siu'an.'

She tried to recall every word, every nuance, from the moment Merean first spoke. Siu'an listened with a distant look, filing and sorting. 'Cadsuane could be one of Tamra's chosen,' she agreed when Moiraine finished. 'Or she could be Black Ajah.' She barely hesitated over the words. 'Maybe she's just trying to get you out of the way until she can dispose of you without rousing suspicion. The trouble is, any of them could be either.' Leaning across her bundle, she touched Moiraine's knee. 'Can you bring your horse from the stable without being seen? I have a good mount, but I don't know if she can carry both of us. We should be hours from here before they know we're gone.'

Moiraine smiled in spite of herself. She very much doubted the good mount. Her friend's eye for horseflesh was no better than her seat in the saddle, and sometimes Siu'an fell off nearly before the animal moved. The ride north must have been agony. And full of fear. 'No one knows you are here at all, Siu'an,' she said. 'Best if it stays so. You have your book? Good. If I remain until morning, I will have a day's start on them instead of hours. You go on to Chachin now. Take some of my coin.' By the state of Siu'an's dress, she had spent the last part of that trip sleeping under bushes. A fisherman's daughter had no estates to provide gold. 'Start looking for the Lady Ines, and I will catch you up there.'

It was not that easy, of course. Siu'an had a stubborn streak as wide as the Erinin. Quite aside from that, as novice and Accepted it had been the fisherman's daughter who led, not the king's niece, something that had startled Moiraine at first, until she realized that it felt natural somehow. Siu'an had been born to lead.

'I have enough for my needs,' she grumbled, but Moiraine insisted on handing her half the coins in her purse, and when Moiraine reminded her of their pledge during their first months in the Tower, that what one owned belonged to the other as well, she muttered, 'We swore we'd find beautiful young princes to bond, too, and marry them besides. Girls say all sort of silly things. You watch after yourself, now. You leave me alone in this, and I'll wring your neck.'

Embracing to say good bye, Moiraine found it hard to let go. An hour ago, her worries had been whether she might be stuck away on a farm, or at worse birched. Now . . . The Black Ajah. She wanted to empty her stomach. If only she had Siu'an's courage. Watching Siu'an slip down the alley adjusting that bundle on her back again, Moiraine wished she was Green. Only Greens bonded more than one Warder, and she would have liked at least three or four to guard her back right then.

Walking back up the street, she could not help looking at everyone she passed, man or woman. If the Black Ajah - her stomach twisted every time she thought that name - if they were involved, then ordinary Darkfriends were, too. No one denied that some misguided people believed the Dark One would give them immortality, people who would kill and do every sort of evil to gain that hoped-for reward. And if any sister could be Black Ajah, anyone she met could be a Darkfriend. She hoped Siu'an remembered that.

As she approached The Gates of Heaven, a sister appeared in the inn's doorway. Part of a sister, at least; all she could see was an arm with a fringed shawl over it. A tall man who had just come out, his hair in two belled braids, turned back to speak for a moment, but the shawl-draped arm gestured peremptorily, and he strode past Moiraine wearing a scowl. She would not have thought twice of it if not for thinking about the Black Ajah and Darkfriends. The Light knew, Aes Sedai did speak to men, and some did more than speak. She had been thinking of Darkfriends, though. And Black sisters. If only she could have made out the colour of that fringe. She hurried the last thirty-odd paces frowning.

Merean and Larelle were seated together by themselves near the door, both still wearing their shawls. Few sisters did that except for ceremony, or for show. Both women were watching Cadsuane go into that private sitting room, followed by a pair of grey-haired men who looked as hard as last year's oak. She still wore her shawl, too, with the white Flame of Tar Valon bright on her back. It could have been any of them. Cadsuane might be looking for another Warder; Greens always seemed to be looking. Moiraine did not know whether Merean and Larelle had Warders. The fellow's scowl might have been for hearing he did not measure up. There were a hundred possible explanations, and she put the man out of her head. The sure dangers were real enough without inventing more.

Before she was three steps into the common room, Master Helvin bustled up in a green-striped apron, a bald man nearly as wide as he was tall, and handed her a new irritation. With three more Aes Sedai stopping at his inn, he need to shuffle the beds, as he put it. The Lady Alys would not mind sharing hers, certainly, under the circumstances. Mistress Palan was a most pleasant woman.

Haesel Palan was a rug-merchant from Murandy with the lilt of Lugard in her voice. Moiraine heard more of it than she wanted from the moment she stepped into the small room that had been hers alone. Her clothes had been moved from the wardrobe to pegs on the wall, her comb and brush displaced from the washstand for Mistress Palan's. The plump woman might have been diffident with 'Lady Alys', but not with a wilder who everybody said was off in the morning to become a novice in the White Tower. She lectured Moiraine on the duties of a novice, all of it wrong. She followed Moiraine down to dinner and gathered other traders of her acquaintance at the table, every woman of them eager to share what she knew of the White Tower. Which was nothing at all. They shared it in great detail, though. Moiraine thought to escape by retiring early, but Mistress Palan appeared almost as soon as she had her dress off and talked until she dropped off to sleep.

It was not an easy night. The bed was narrow, the woman's elbows sharp and her feet icy despite thick blankets that trapped the warmth of the small stove under the bed. The rainstorm that had threatened all day broke, wind and thunder rattling the shutters for hours. Moiraine doubted she could have slept in any event. Darkfriends and the Black Ajah danced in her head. She saw Tamra being dragged from her sleep, dragged away to somewhere secret and tortured by women wielding the Power. Sometimes the women wore Merean's face, and Larelle's, and Cadsuane's, and every sister's she had ever seen. Sometimes Tamra's face became her own.

When the door creaked slowly open in the dark hours of morning, Moiraine embraced the Source in a flash. *Saidar* filled her to the point where the sweetness and joy came close to pain. Not as much of the Power as she would be able to handle in another year, much less five, yet a hair more would burn the ability out of her now, or kill her. One was as bad as the other, but she wanted to draw more, and not just because the Power always made you want more.

Cadsuane put her head in. Moiraine had forgotten her promise, her threat. Cadsuane saw the glow, of course, could feel how much she held. 'Fool girl,' was all the woman said before leaving.

Moiraine counted to one hundred slowly, then swung her feet out from under the covers. Now was as good a time as any. Mistress Palan heaved on to her side and began to snore. Channelling Fire, Moiraine lit one of the lamps and dressed hurriedly. A riding dress, this time. Reluctantly she decided to abandon her saddlebags along with everything else she had to leave behind. Anyone who saw her moving about might not think too much of it even at this time of the morning, but not if she had saddlebags over her shoulder. All she took was what she could fit into the pockets sewn inside her cloak, little more than some spare stockings and a clean shift. Mistress Palan was still snoring as she closed the door behind her.

The skinny groom on night duty was startled to see her with the sky just beginning to turn grey, but a silver penny had him knuckling his forehead and saddling her bay mare. She regretted leaving her packhorse behind, but not even a fool noble - she heard the fellow mutter that -would take a pack animal for a morning jaunt. Climbing into Arrow's high-cantled saddle, she gave the man a cool smile instead of the second penny he would have received without the comment, and rode slowly out into damp, empty streets. Just out for a ride, however early. It looked to be a good day. The sky looked rained out, for one thing, and there was little wind.

The lamps were still lit all along the streets and alleys, leaving no more than the palest shadow anywhere, yet the only people to be seen were the Night Watch's patrols and the Lamplighters, heavily armed as they made their rounds to make sure no lamp went out. A wonder that people could live so close to the Blight

that a Myrddraal could step out of any dark shadow. No one went out in the night, though. Not in the Borderlands.

Which was why she was surprised to see she was not the first to reach the western gates. Slowing Arrow, she stayed well back from the three very large men waiting with a packhorse behind their mounts. Their attention was all on the barred gates, with now and again a word shared with the gate guards. They barely glanced at her. The lamps here showed their faces clearly. A grizzled old man and a hard-faced young one wearing braided leather cords tied around their heads. Malkieri? She thought that was what that meant. The third was an Arafellin with belled braids. The same fellow she had seen leaving The Gates of Heaven.

By the time the bright sliver of sunrise allowed the gates to be swung open, several merchants' trains had lined up to depart. The three men were first through, but Moiraine let a train of a dozen wagons behind eight-horse teams rumble ahead of her before she followed across the bridge and on to the road through the hills. She kept the three in sight, though. They were heading in the same direction so far, after all.

They moved quickly, good riders who barely shifted a rein, but a trot suited her. The more distance she put between herself and Cadsuane, the better. The merchants' wagons fell back out of sight long before they reached the first village near midday, a small cluster of tile-roofed stone houses around a tiny inn on a forested hill slope. Moiraine paused long enough to ask whether anyone knew a woman named Avene Sahera. The answer was no, and she galloped on, not slowing until the three men appeared on the hard-packed road ahead, their horses still in that ground-eating pace. Maybe they knew nothing more than the name of the sister the Arafellin had spoken to, but anything at all she learned about Cadsuane or the other two would be to the good.

She formulated several plans for approaching them, and discarded each. Three men on a deserted forest road could well decide a young woman alone was a good opportunity, especially if they were what she feared. Handling them presented no problem, if it came to it, but she wanted to avoid that. Woods gave way to scattered farms, and farms faded to more woods. A red-crested eagle soared overhead and became a shape against the descending sun.

As her shadow stretched out behind her, she decided to forget the men and find a place to sleep. With luck she might see more farms soon, and if a little silver did not bring a bed, a hayloft would have to do.

Ahead, the three men stopped, conferring for a moment, then one took the packhorse and turned aside into the forest. The others dug in their heels and galloped on.

Moiraine stared after them. The Arafellin was one of the pair rushing off, but if they were travelling together, maybe he had mentioned meeting an Aes Sedai to his companion. And one man would certainly be less trouble than three, if she was careful. Riding to where rider and packhorse had vanished, she dismounted.

Tracking was a thing most ladies left to their huntsmen, but she had taken an interest in the years when climbing trees and getting dirty had seemed equal fun. Broken twigs and kicked winter-fall leaves left a trail a child could have followed. A hundred paces or so into the forest, she spotted a pond in a hollow through the trees. The fellow had already unsaddled and hobbled his bay - a fine-looking animal - and was setting the packsaddle on the ground. It was the younger of the Malkieri. He looked even larger, this close. Unbuckling his swordbelt, he sat down facing the pond, laid sword and belt beside him, and put his hands on his knees. He seemed to be staring off across the water, still glittering through the late afternoon shadows. He did not move a muscle.

Moiraine considered. Plainly he had been left to make camp. The others would come back. A question or two would not take long, though. And if he was unnerved a little - say at finding a woman suddenly standing right behind him - he might answer before he thought. Tying Arrow's reins to a low branch, she gathered her cloak and skirts and moved forward as silently as possible. A low hummock stood humped up behind him, and she stepped up on to that. Added height could help. He was a very tall man. And it might help if he found her with her beltknife in one hand and his sword in the other. Channelling, she whisked the scabbarded blade from his side. Every little bit of shock she could manage for him. He moved faster than thought. Her grasp closed on the scabbard, and he uncoiled, whirling, one hand clutching the scabbard between hers, the other seizing the front of her dress. Before she could think to channel, she was flying through the air. She had just time to see the pond coming up at her, just time to shout something, she did not know what, and then she struck the surface flat, driving all the wind out of her, struck with a great splash and sank. The water was freezing! Saidar fled in her shock.

Floundering to her feet, she stood up to her waist in the icy water, coughing, wet hair clinging to her

face, sodden cloak dragging at her shoulders. Furiously she twisted around to confront her attacker, furiously embraced the Source once more. The test for the shawl required channelling with absolute calm under great stress, and far worse than this had been done to her then. She turned, prepared to knock him down and drub him till he squealed!

He stood shaking his head and frowning at the spot where she had stood, a long stride from where he had sat. When he deigned to notice her, he came to the edge of the pond and bent to stretch out a hand. 'Unwise to try separating a man from his sword,' he said, and after a glance at the coloured slashes on her dress, added, 'My Lady.' Hardly an apology. His startlingly blue eyes did not quite meet hers. If he was hiding mirth . . . !

Muttering under her breath, she splashed awkwardly to where she could take his outstretched hand in both of hers . . . and heaved with all of her might. Ignoring icy water tickling down your ribs was not easy, and if she was wet, so would he be, and without any need to use the -

He straightened, raised his arm, and she came out of the water dangling from his hand. In consternation she stared at him until her feet touched the ground and he backed away.

'I'll start a fire and hang up blankets so you can dry yourself,' he murmured, still not meeting her gaze.

He was as good as his word, and by the time the other men appeared, she was standing beside a small fire surrounded by blankets dug from his packsaddles and hung from branches. She had no need of the fire for drying, of course, or the privacy. The proper weave of Water had taken every drop from her hair and clothes while she stayed in them. As well he did not see that, though. And she did appreciate the flames' warmth. Anyway, she had to stay inside the blankets long enough for the man to think she had used the fire as he intended. She very definitely held on to *saidar*.

The other men arrived, full of questions about whether 'she' had followed into the woods. They had known? Men watched for bandits in these times, but they had noticed a lone woman and decided she was following them? It seemed suspicious.

'A Cairhienin, Lan? I suppose you've seen a Cairhienin in her skin, but I never have.' That certainly caught her ear, and with the Power filling her, so did another sound. Steel whispering on leather. A sword leaving its sheath. Preparing several weaves that would stop the lot of them in their tracks, she made a crack in the blankets to peek out.

To her surprise, the man who had dunked her - Lan? - stood with his back to her blankets. He was the one with sword in hand. The Arafellin, facing him, looked surprised. 'You remember the sight of the Thousand Lakes, Ryne,' Lan said coldly. 'Does a woman need protection from your eyes?'

For a moment, she thought Ryne was going to draw despite the blade already in Lan's hand, but the older man, a much battered, greying fellow though as tall as the others, calmed matters, took the other two a little distance away with talk of some game called 'sevens'. A strange game it seemed to be. Lan and Ryne sat crosslegged facing one another, their swords sheathed, then without warning drew, each blade flashing towards the other man's throat, stopping just short of flesh. The older man pointed to Ryne, they sheathed swords, and then did it again. For as long as she watched, that was how it went. Perhaps Ryne had not been as overconfident as he seemed.

Waiting inside the blankets, she tried to recall what she had been taught of Malkier. Not a great deal, except as history. Ryne remembered the Thousand Lakes, so he must be Malkieri, too. There had been something about distressed women. Now that she was with them, she might as well stay until she learned what she could.

When she came out from behind the blankets, she was ready. 'I claim the right of a woman alone,' she told them formally. 'I travel to Chachin, and I ask the shelter of your swords.' She also pressed a fat silver coin into each man's hand. She was not really sure about this ridiculous 'woman alone' business, but silver caught most men's attention. 'And two more each, paid in Chachin.'

The reactions were not what she expected. Ryne glared at the coin as he turned it over in his fingers. Lan looked at his without expression and tucked it into his coat pocket with a grunt. She had given them some of her last Tar Valon marks, she realized, but Tar Valon coins could be found anywhere, along with those of every other land.

Bukama, the grizzled man, bowed with his left hand on his knee. 'Honour to serve, my Lady,' he said. 'To Chachin, my life above yours.' His eyes were also blue, and they, too, would not quite meet hers. She hoped he did not turn out to be a Darkfriend.

Learning anything proved to be difficult. Impossible. First the men were busy setting up camp, tending the horses, making a larger fire. They did not seem eager to face a new spring night without that. Bukama and Lan barely said a word over a dinner of flatbread and dried meat that she tried not to wolf down. Her stomach remembered all too well that she had not eaten that day. Ryne talked and was quite charming, really, with a dimple in his cheek when he smiled, and a sparkle in his blue eyes, but he gave no opening for her to mention The Gates of Heaven or Aes Sedai. When she finally enquired why he was going to Chachin, his face turned sad.

'Every man has to die somewhere,' he said softly, and went off to make up his blankets.

Lan took the first watch, sitting crosslegged not far from Ryne, and when Bukama doused the fire and rolled himself up in his blankets near Lan, she wove a ward of Spirit around each man. Flows of Spirit she could hold on to sleeping, and if any of them moved in the night, the ward would wake her without alerting them. It meant waking every time they changed guard, but there was nothing for it. Her own blankets lay well away from the men, and as she was lying down, Bukama murmured something she could not catch. She heard Lan's reply plainly enough.

'I'd sooner trust an Aes Sedai, Bukama. Go to sleep.'

All the anger she had tamped down flared up. The man threw her into an icy pond, he did not apologize, he . . . ! She channelled, Air and Water weaving with a touch of Earth. A thick cylinder of water rose from the surface of the pond, stretching up and up in the moonlight, arching over. Crashing down on the fool who was so free with his tongue!

Bukama and Ryne bounded to their feet with oaths, but she continued the torrent for a count of ten before letting it end. Freed water splashed down across the campsite. She expected to see a sodden, half-frozen man ready to learn proper respect. He was dripping wet, a few small fish flopping around his feet. He was standing on his feet. With his sword out.

'Shadowspawn?' Ryne said in a disbelieving tone, and atop him, Lan said, 'Maybe! Guard the woman, Ryne! Bukama, take west; I'll take east!'

'Not Shadowspawn!' Moiraine snapped, stopping them in their tracks. They stared at her. She wished she could see their expressions better in the moonshadows, but those cloud-shifting shadows aided her, too, cloaking her in mystery. With an effort she gave her voice every bit of cool Aes Sedai serenity she could muster. 'It is unwise to show anything except respect to an Aes Sedai, Master Lan.'

'Aes Sedai?' Ryne whispered. Despite the dim light, the awe on his face was clear. Or maybe it was fear.

No one else made a sound, except for Bukama's grumbles as he shifted his bed away from the mud. Ryne spent a long time moving his blankets in silence, giving her small bows whenever she glanced his way. Lan made no attempt to dry off. He started to choose a new spot for his watch, then stopped and sat back where he had been, in the mud and water. She might have thought it a gesture of humility, only he glanced at her, very nearly meeting her eyes this time. If that was humility, kings were the most humble men on earth.

She wove her wards around them again, of course. If anything, revealing herself only made it more necessary. She did not go to sleep for quite a while, though. She had a great deal to think about. For one thing, none of the men had asked *why* she was following them. The man had been on his *feet!* When she drifted off, she was thinking of Ryne, strangely. A pity if he was afraid of her, now. He was charming, and she did not mind a man wanting to see her unclothed, only his telling others about it.

Lan knew the ride to Chachin would be one he would rather forget, and it met his expectations. It stormed twice, freezing rain mixed with ice, and that was the least. Bukama was angry that he refused to make proper pledge to the diminutive woman who claimed to be Aes Sedai, but Bukama knew the reasons and did not press. He only grumbled whenever he thought Lan could hear; Aes Sedai or not, a decent man followed certain forms. As if he did not share Lan's reasons. Ryne twitched and peered wide-eyed at her, fetched and trotted and offered up compliments on 'skin of snowy silk' and the 'deep, dark pools of her eyes' like a courtier on a leash. He seemed unable to decide between besotted and terrified, and he let her see both. That would have been bad enough, but Ryne was right; Lan had seen a Cairhienin in her skin, more than one, and they had all tried to mesh him in a scheme, or two, or three. Over one particularly memorable ten days in the south of Cairhien, he had almost been killed six times and nearly married twice. A Cairhienin *and* an Aes Sedai? There could be no worse combination.

This Alys - she told them to call her Alys, which he doubted as much as the Great Serpent ring she produced, especially after she tucked it back into her beltpouch and said no one must know she was Aes Sedai - this 'Alys' had a temper. Normally, he did not mind that, cold or hot, in man or woman. Hers was ice. That first night he had sat in the wet to let her know he would accept what she had done. If they were to travel together, better to end it with honours even, as she must see it. Except that she did not.

They rode hard, never stopping long in a village and sleeping under the stars most nights, since no one had the coin for inns, not for four people with horses. He slept when he could. The second night she remained awake till dawn and made sure he did as well, with sharp flicks of an invisible switch whenever he nodded off. The third night, sand somehow got inside his clothes and boots, a thick coating of it. He had shaken out what he could and ridden covered in grit the next day. The fourth night . . . He could not understand how she managed to make ants crawl into his smallclothes, or make them all bite at once. It had been her doing for sure. She was standing over him when his eyes shot open, and she seemed surprised that he did not cry out. Clearly, she wanted some response, some reaction, but he could not see what. Surely not the pledge of protection. Bukama's sufficed, and besides, she had given them money. The woman did not know insult when she offered it.

When they had first seen her behind them, outpacing the merchant trains and the shield of their guards, Bukama had offered a reason for a woman alone to follow three men. If six swordsmen could not kill a man in daylight, perhaps one woman could in darkness. Bukama had not mentioned Edeyn, of course. In truth, it plainly could not be that, or he would be dead instead of uncomfortable, yet Alys herself never made any explanation, however much Bukama waited for one. Edeyn might set a woman to watch him, thinking he would be less on his guard. So Lan watched her. But the only suspicious thing he saw, if it could be called that, was that she asked questions whenever they came to a village, always away from him and the others, and she went silent if they came too near. Two days from Canluum, she stopped asking, though. Perhaps she had found an answer in the market village called Ravinda, but if so, she did not seem happy about it. That night she discovered a patch of blisterleaf near their campsite, and to his shame, he almost lost his temper.

If Canluum was a city of hills, Chachin was a city of mountains. The three highest rose almost a mile even with their peaks sheared off short, and all glittered in the sun with colourful glazed tile roofs and tile-covered palaces. Atop the tallest of those the Aesdaishar Palace shone brighter than any other in red and green, the prancing Red Horse flying above its largest dome. Three towered ringwalls surrounded the city, as did a deep dry moat a hundred paces wide spanned by two dozen bridges, each with a fortress hulking at its mouth. The traffic was too great here, and the Blight too far away, for the guards with the Red Horse on their chests to be so diligent as in Canluum, but crossing the Bridge of Sunrise amid tides of wagons and people flowing both ways still took some little while. Once inside, Lan wasted no time drawing rein.

'We are within the walls of Chachin,' he told the woman. 'The pledge has been kept. Keep your coin,' he added coldly when she reached for her purse.

Ryne immediately started going on about giving offence to Aes Sedai and offering her smiling apologies, while Bukama rumbled about men with the manners of pigs. The woman herself gazed at Lan with so little expression, she might even have been what she claimed. A dangerous claim if untrue. And if true . . .

Whirling Cat Dancer, he galloped up the street scattering people afoot and some mounted. Bukama and Ryne caught him up before he was halfway up the mountain to the Aesdaishar. If Edeyn was in Chachin, she would be there. Wisely, Bukama and Ryne held their silence.

The palace filled the flattened mountaintop completely, an immense, shining structure of domes and high balconies covering fifty hides, a small city to itself. The great bronze gates, worked with the Red Horse, stood open beneath a red-tiled arch, and once Lan identified himself - as Lan Mandragoran, not al'Lan - the guards' stiffness turned to smiling bows. Servants in red-and-green came running to take the horses and show each man to rooms befitting his station. Bukama and Ryne each received a small room above one of the barracks. Lan was given three rooms draped in silk tapestries, with a bedchamber that overlooked one of the palace gardens, two square-faced serving women to tend him, and a lanky young fellow to run errands.

A little careful questioning of the servants brought answers. Queen Ethenielle was making a progress through the heartland, but Brys, the Prince Consort, was in residence. As was the Lady Edeyn Arrel. The women smiled when they said that; they had known what he wanted from the first.

He washed himself, but let the women dress him. just because they were servants was no reason to insult them. He had one white silk shirt that did not show too much wear, and a good black silk coat embroidered

along the sleeves with golden bloodroses among their hooked thorns. Bloodroses for loss and remembrance. Then he set the women outside to guard his door and sat to wait. His meetings with Edeyn must be public, with as many people around as possible.

A summons came from her, to her chambers, which he ignored. Courtesy demanded he be given time to rest from his journey, yet it seemed a very long time before the invitation to join Brys came, brought by the *shatayan*. A stately, greying woman with a presence to match any queen, she had charge of all the palace servants, and it was an honour to be conducted by her personally. Outsiders needed a guide to find their way anywhere in the palace. His sword remained on the lacquered rack by the door. It would do him no good here, and would insult Brys besides, indicating he thought he needed to protect himself.

He expected a private meeting first, but the *shatayan* took him to a columned hall full of people. Soft-footed servants moved through the crowd offering spiced wine to Kandori lords and ladies in silks embroidered with House sigils, and folk in fine woollens worked with the sigils of the more important guilds. And to others, too. Lan saw men wearing the *hadori* he knew had not worn it these ten years or more. Women with hair still cut at the shoulders and higher wore the small dot of the *ki'sain* painted on their foreheads. They bowed at his appearance, and made deep curtsies, those men and women who had decided to remember Malkier.

Prince Brys was a stocky, rough-hewn man in his middle years who looked more suited to armour than his green silks, though in truth he was accustomed to either. Brys was Ethenielle's Swordbearer, the general of her armies, as well as her consort. He caught Lan's shoulders, refusing to allow him to bow.

'None of that from the man who twice saved my life in the Blight, Lan.' Brys laughed. 'Besides, your coming seems to have rubbed some of your luck off on Diryk. He fell from a balcony this morning, a good fifty feet, without breaking a bone.' He motioned his second son, a handsome dark-eyed boy of eight in a coat like his, to come forward. A large bruise marred the side of the boy's head, and he moved with the stiffness of other bruises, but he made a formal bow spoiled only somewhat by a wide grin. 'He should be at his lessons,' Brys confided, 'but he was so eager to meet you, he'd have forgotten his letters and cut himself on a sword.' Frowning, the boy protested that he would never cut himself.

Lan returned the lad's bow with equal formality, then had to put up with a deluge of questions. Yes, he had fought Aiel, in the south and on the Shienaran marches, but they were just men, if dangerous, not ten feet tall; they did veil their faces before killing, but they did not eat their dead. No, the White Tower was not as high as a mountain, though it was taller than anything made by men that Lan had ever seen, even the Stone of Tear. Given a chance, the boy would have drained him dry about the Aiel, and the wonders of the great cities in the south like Tar Valon and Far Madding. Likely, he would not have believed Chachin was as big as either of those.

'Lord Mandragoran will fill your head to your heart's content later,' Brys told the boy. 'There is someone else he must meet now. Off with you to Mistress Tuval and your books.'

Edeyn was exactly as Lan remembered. Oh, ten years older, with touches of white streaking her temples and a few fine lines at the corners of her eyes, but those large dark eyes gripped him. Her *ki'sain* was still the white of a widow, and her hair still hung in black waves below her waist. She wore a red silk gown in the Domani style, clinging and little short of sheer. She was beautiful, but even she could do nothing here.

For a moment she merely looked at him, cool and considering, when he made his bow. 'It would have been . . . easier had you come to me,' she murmured, seeming not to care whether Brys heard. And then, shockingly, she knelt gracefully and took his hands in hers. 'Beneath the Light,' she announced in a strong, clear voice, 'I, Edeyn ti Gemallen Arrel, pledge fealty to al'Lan Mandragoran, Lord of the Seven Towers, Lord of the Lakes, the true Blade of Malkier. May he sever the Shadow!' Even Brys looked startled. A moment of silence held while she kissed Lan's fingers, then cheers erupted on every side. Cries of 'The Golden Crane!' and even 'Kandor rides with Malkier!'

The sound freed him to pull his hands loose, to lift her to her feet. 'My Lady,' he began in a tight voice.

'What must be, will be,' she said, putting a hand over his lips. And then she faded back into the crowd of those who wanted to cluster around him, congratulate him, pledge fealty on the spot had he let them.

Brys rescued him, drawing him off to a long, stone-railed walk above a two-hundred-foot drop to the roofs below. It was known as a place Brys went to be private, and no one followed. Only one door let on to it, no window overlooked, and no sound from the palace intruded. 'What will you do?' the older man asked simply as they walked.

'I do not know,' Lan replied. She had won only a skirmish, but he felt stunned at the ease of it. A formidable opponent, the woman who wore part of his soul in her hair.

For the rest they spoke quietly of hunting and bandits and whether this past year's flare-up in the Blight might die down soon. Brys regretted withdrawing his army from the war against the Aiel, but there had been no alternative. They talked of the rumours about a man who could channel - every tale had him in a different place; Brys thought it another jak o'the mists and Lan agreed - and of the Aes Sedai who seemed to be everywhere, for what reason no one knew. Ethenielle had written him that two sisters had caught a woman pretending to be Aes Sedai in a village along her progression. The woman could channel, but that did her no good. The two real Aes Sedai flogged her squealing through the village, making her confess her crime to every last man and woman who lived there. Then one of the sisters carried her off to Tar Valon for her true punishment, whatever that might be. Lan found himself hoping that Alys had not lied about being Aes Sedai.

He hoped to avoid Edeyn the rest of the day, too, but when he was guided back to his rooms, she was there, waiting languorously in one of the gilded chairs. The servants were nowhere to be seen.

'You are no longer beautiful, I fear, sweetling,' she said when he came in. 'I think you may even be ugly when you are older. But I always enjoyed your eyes more than your face. And your hands.'

He stopped still gripping the doorhandle. 'My Lady, not two hours gone you swore 'She cut him off.

'And I will obey my king. But a king is not a king, alone with his *carneira*. I brought your *daori*. Bring it to me.'

Unwillingly, his eyes followed her gesture to a flat lacquered box on a small table beside the door. Lifting the hinged lid took as much effort as lifting a boulder. Coiled inside lay a long cord woven of hair. He could recall every moment of the morning after their first night, when she took him to the women's quarters of the Royal Palace in Fal Moran and let ladies and servants watch as she cut his hair at his shoulders. She even told them what it signified. The women had all been amused, making jokes as he sat at Edeyn's feet to weave the *daori* for her. Edeyn kept custom, but in her own way. The hair felt soft and supple; she must have had it rubbed with lotions every day.

Crossing the floor slowly, he knelt before her and held out his *daori* stretched between his hands. 'In token of what I owe to you, Edeyn, always and for ever.' If his voice did not hold the fervour of that first morning, surely she understood.

She did not take the cord. Instead, she studied him. 'I knew you had not been gone so long as to forget our ways,' she said finally. 'Come.'

Rising, she grasped his wrist and drew him to the windows overlooking the garden ten paces below. Two servants were spreading water from buckets, and a young woman was strolling along a slate path in a blue dress as bright as any of the early flowers that grew beneath the trees.

'My daughter, Iselle.' For a moment, pride and affection warmed Edeyn's voice. 'Do you remember her? She is seventeen, now. She hasn't chosen her *carneira*, yet,' young men were chosen by their *carneira*; young women chose theirs, 'but I think it time she married anyway.'

He vaguely recalled a child who always had servants running, the blossom of her mother's heart, but his head had been full of Edeyn, then. 'She is as beautiful as her mother, I am sure,' he said politely. He twisted the *daori* in his hands. She had too much advantage as long as he held it, all advantage, but she had to take it from him. 'Edeyn, we must talk.' She ignored that.

'Time you were married, too, sweetling. Since none of your female relatives is alive, it is up to me to arrange.'

He gasped at what she seemed to be suggesting. At first he could not believe. '*Iselle?*' he said hoarsely. '*Your* daughter?' She might keep custom in her own way, but this was scandalous. 'I'll not be reined into something so shameful, Edeyn. Not by you, or by this.' He shook the *daori* at her, but she only looked at it and smiled.

'Of course you won't be reined, sweetling. You are a man, not a boy. Yet you do keep custom,' she mused, running a finger along the cord of hair quivering between his hands. 'Perhaps we do need to talk.'

But it was to the bed that she led him.

Moiraine spent most of the day asking discreet questions at inns in the rougher parts of Chachin, where her silk dress and divided skirts drew stares from patrons and innkeepers alike. One leathery fellow wearing a

permanent leer told her that his establishment was not for her and tried to escort her to a better, while a round-faced, squinting woman cackled that the evening trade would have a tender pretty like her for dinner if she did not scurry away quick, and a fatherly old man with pink cheeks and a joyous smile was all too eager for her to drink the spiced wine he prepared out of her sight. There was nothing for it but to grit her teeth and move on. That was the sort of place Siuan had liked to visit when they were allowed a rare trip into Tar Valon as Accepted, cheap and unlikely to be frequented by sisters, but none had a blue-eyed Tairen staying under any name. Cold daylight began to settle towards yet another icy night.

She was walking Arrow through lengthening shadows, eyeing darkneses that moved suspiciously in an alley and thinking that she would have to give up for today, when Siuan came bustling up from behind.

'I thought you might look down here when you came,' Siuan said, taking her elbow to hurry her along. 'Let's get inside before we freeze.' She eyed those shadows in the alley, too, and absently fingered her beltknife as if using the Power could not deal with any ten of them. Well, not without revealing themselves. Perhaps it was best to move quickly. 'Not the quarter for you, Moiraine. There are fellows around here would bloody well have you for dinner before you knew you were in the pot. Are you laughing or choking?'

Siuan, it turned out, was at a most respectable inn called The Evening Star, which catered to merchants of middling rank, especially women unwilling to be bothered by noise or rough sorts in the common room. A pair of bull-shouldered fellows made sure there was none of that. Siuan's room was tidy and warm, if not large, and the innkeeper, a lean woman with an air of brooking little nonsense, made no objections to Moiraine joining Siuan. So long as the extra for two was paid.

While Moiraine was hanging her cloak on a peg, Siuan settled crosslegged on the not-very-wide bed. She seemed invigorated since Canluum. A goal always made Siuan bubble with enthusiasm. 'I've had a time, Moiraine, I tell you. That fool horse nearly beat me to death getting here. The Creator made people to walk or go by boat, not be bounced around. I suppose the Sahera woman wasn't the one, or you'd be jumping like a spawning redbait. I found Ines Demain almost right off, but not where I can reach her. She's a new widow, but she did have a son, for sure. Named him Rahien because she saw the dawn come up over Dragonmount. Talk of the streets. Everybody thinks it a fool reason to name a child.'

'Avene Sahera's son was born a week too early and thirty miles from Dragonmount,' Moiraine said when Siuan paused for breath. She pushed down a momentary thrill. Seeing dawn over the mountain did not mean the child had been born on it. There was no chair or stool, nor room for one, so she sat on the end of the bed. 'If you have found Ines and her son, Siuan, why is she out of reach?' The Lady Ines, it turned out, was in the Aesdaishar Palace, where Siuan could have gained entry easily as Aes Sedai and otherwise only if the Palace was hiring servants.

The Aesdaishar Palace. 'We will take care of that in the morning,' Moiraine sighed. It meant risk, yet the Lady Ines had to be questioned. No woman Moiraine had found yet had been able to see Dragonmount when her child was born. 'Have you seen any sign of . . . of the Black Ajah?' She had to get used to saying that name.

Instead of answering immediately, Siuan frowned at her lap and fingered her skirt. 'This is a strange city, Moiraine,' she said finally. 'Lamps in the streets, and women who fight duels, even if they do deny it, and more gossip than ten men full of ale could spew. Some of it interesting.' She leaned forward to put a hand on Moiraine's knee. 'Everybody's talking about a young blacksmith who died of a broken back a couple of nights ago. Nobody expected much of him, but this last month or so he turned into quite a speaker. Convinced his guild to take up money for the poor who've come into the city, afraid of the bandits, folks not connected to a guild or House.'

'Siuan, what under the Light -?'

'Just listen, Moiraine. He collected a lot of silver himself, and it seems he was on his way to the guild house to turn in six or eight bags of it when he was killed. Fool was carrying it all by himself. The point is, there wasn't a bloody coin of it taken, Moiraine. And he didn't have a mark on him, aside from his broken back.'

They shared a long look, then Moiraine shook her head. 'I cannot see how to tie that to Meilyn or Tamra. A blacksmith? Siuan, we can go mad thinking we see Black sisters everywhere.'

'We can die from thinking they aren't there,' Siuan replied. 'Well. Maybe we can be silverpike in the nets instead of grunTERS. Just remember silverpike go to the fishmarket, too. What do you have in mind about this Lady Ines?'

Moiraine told her. Siuan did not like it, and this time it took most of the night to make her see sense. In

truth, Moiraine almost wished Siuan would talk her into trying something else. But Lady Ines had seen dawn over Dragonmount. At least Ethenielle's Aes Sedai advisor was with her in the south.

Morning was a whirlwind of activity, little of it satisfying. Moiraine got what she wanted, but not without having to bite her tongue. And Siuan started up again. Arguments Moiraine had dealt with the night before cropped up anew. Siuan did not like being argued out of what she thought was right. She did not like Moiraine taking all the risks. A bear with a sore tooth would have been better company. Even that fellow Lan!

A near-dawn visit to a banker's counting house produced gold. After the stern-eyed woman used an enlarging glass to study the Cairhienin banker's seal at the bottom of the letter-of-rights Moiraine presented. An enlarging glass! At least the letter itself was only a little blurred from its immersion in that pond. Mistress Noallin did not bother to hide her surprise when the pair of them began distributing purses of gold beneath their cloaks.

'Is Chachin so lawless two women are not safe by daylight?' Moiraine asked her civilly. 'I think our business is done. You may have your man show us out.' She and Siuan clinked when they moved.

Outside, Siuan muttered that even that blacksmith must have staggered, loaded down like a mule. And who could have broken his back that way? Whatever the reason, it must be the Black Ajah. An imposing woman with ivory combs in her hair heard enough of that to give a start, then hike her skirts to her knees and run, leaving her two gaping servants to scramble after her through the crowd. Siuan flushed but remained defiantly unrepentant.

A slim seamstress with a haughty air informed Moiraine that what she wanted was easily done. At end of the month, perhaps. A great many ladies had ordered new gowns. A king was visiting in the Aesdaishar Palace. The King of Malkier!

'The last King of Malkier died twenty-five years ago, Mistress Dorelmin,' Moiraine said, spilling thirty gold crowns on the receiving table. Silene Dorelmin eyed the fat coins greedily, and her eyes positively shone when she was told there would be as much again when the dresses were done. 'But I will keep six coins from the second thirty for each day it takes.' Suddenly it seemed that the dresses could be finished sooner than a month after all. Much sooner.

'Did you see what that skinny trull was wearing?' Siuan said as they left. 'You should have your dresses made like that, ready to fall off. You might as well enjoy men looking at you if you're going to lay your fool head on the chopping block.'

Moiraine performed a novice exercise, imaging herself a rosebud in stillness, opening to the sun. As always, it brought calm. She would crack a tooth if she kept grinding them. 'There is no other way, Siuan. Do you think the innkeeper will hire out one of her strongarms?' The King of *Malkier*? Light! The woman must have thought her a complete fool!

At mid-morning two days after Moiraine arrived in Chachin, a yellowlacquered carriage driven by a fellow with shoulders like a bull arrived at the Aesdaishar Palace, with two mares tied behind, a fine-necked bay and a lanky grey. The Lady Moiraine Damodred, coloured slashes marching from the high neck of her dark blue gown to below her knees, was received with all due honour. The name of House Damodred was known, if not hers, and with King Laman dead, any Damodred might ascend to the Sun Throne. If another House did not seize it. She was given suitable apartments, three rooms looking north across the city towards higher, snow-capped peaks, and assigned servants who rushed about unpacking the lady's brass-bound chests and pouring hot scented water for the lady to wash. No one but the servants so much as glanced at Suki, the Lady Moiraine's maid.

'All right,' Siuan muttered when the servants finally left them alone in the sitting room, 'I admit I'm invisible in this.' Her dark grey dress was fine wool, but entirely plain except for collar and cuffs banded in Damodred colours. 'You, though, stand out like a High Lord pulling oar. Light, I nearly swallowed my tongue when you asked if there were any sisters in the palace. I'm so nervous I'm starting to get light-headed. It feels hard to breathe.'

'It is the altitude,' Moiraine told her. 'You will get used to it. Any visitor would ask about Aes Sedai; you could see, the servants never blinked.' She had held her breath, however, until she heard the answer. One sister would have changed everything. 'I do not know why I must keep telling you. A royal palace is not an inn; "You may call me Lady Alys" would satisfy no one, here. That is fact, not opinion. I must be myself.' The Three Oaths allowed you to say whatever you believed was true even if you could not prove it, as well as to dodge around truth; only words you knew to be a lie would not come off your tongue. 'Suppose you make use of that

invisibility and see what you can learn about the Lady Ines. I would be pleased if we leave as soon as possible.'

Tomorrow, that would be, without causing insult and talk. Sivan was right. Every eye in the palace would be on the outland noblewoman from the House that had started the Aiel War. Any Aes Sedai who came to the Aesdaishar would hear of her immediately, and any Aes Sedai who passed through Chachin might well come. Sivan was right; she was standing on a pedestal like a target, and without a clue as to who might be an archer. Tomorrow, early.

Sivan slipped out, but returned quickly with bad news. The Lady Ines was in seclusion, mourning her husband. 'He fell over dead in his breakfast porridge ten days ago,' Sivan reported, dropping on to a sitting room chair and hanging an arm over the back. Lessons in deportment were something else forgotten once the shawl was hers. 'A much older man, but it seems she loved him. She's been given ten rooms and a garden on the south side of the palace; her husband was a close friend to Prince Brys.' Ines would remain to herself a full month, seeing no one but close family. Her servants only came out when absolutely necessary.

'She will see an Aes Sedai,' Moiraine sighed. Not even a woman in mourning would refuse to see a sister.

Sivan bolted to her feet. 'Are you mad? The Lady Moiraine Damodred attracts enough attention. Moiraine Damodred Aes Sedai might as well send out riders! I thought the idea was to be gone before anyone outside the palace knows we were here!'

One of the serving women came in just then, to announce that the *shatayan* had arrived to escort Moiraine to Prince Brys, and was startled to find Suki standing over her mistress and stabbing a finger at her.

'Tell the *shatayan* I will come to her,' Moiraine said calmly, and as soon as the wide-eyed woman curtsied and backed out, she rose to put herself on a more equal footing, hard enough with Sivan even when one had all the advantage. 'What else do you suggest? Remaining almost two weeks till she comes out will be as bad, and you cannot befriend her servants if they are secluded with her.'

'They may only come out for errands, Moiraine, but I think I can get myself invited inside.'

Moiraine started to say that might take as long as the other, but Sivan took her firmly by the shoulders and turned her around, eyeing her up and down critically. 'A lady's maid is supposed to make sure her mistress is properly dressed,' she said, and gave Moiraine a push towards the door. 'Go. The *shatayan* is waiting for you. And with any luck, a young footman named Cal is waiting for Suki.'

The *shatayan* indeed was waiting, a tall handsome woman, wrapped in dignity and frosty at being made to wait. Her hazel eyes could have chilled wine. Any queen who got on the wrong side of a *shatayan* was a fool, so Moiraine made herself pleasant as the woman escorted her through the halls. She thought she made some progress in melting that frost, but it was difficult to concentrate. A young footman? She did not know whether Sivan had ever been with a man, but surely she would not just to reach Ines' servants! Not a *footman*!

Statues and tapestries lined the hallways, most surprising for what she knew of the Borderlands. Marble carvings of women with flowers or children playing, silk weavings of fields of flowers and nobles in gardens and only a few hunting scenes, without a single battle shown anywhere. At intervals along the halls arched windows looked down into many more gardens than she expected, too, and flagged courtyards, sometimes with a splashing marble fountain. In one of those, she saw something that pushed questions about Sivan and a footman to the back of her mind.

It was a simple courtyard, without fountain or columned walk, and men stood in rows along the walls watching two others, stripped to the waist and fighting with wooden practice swords. Ryne and Bukama. It was fighting, if in practice; blows landed on flesh hard enough for her to hear the thuds. All landed by Ryne. She would have to avoid them, and Lan, if he was there too. He had not bothered to hide his doubts, and he might raise questions she did not dare have asked. Was she Moiraine or Alys? Worse, was she Aes Sedai or a wilder pretending? Questions that would be discussed in the streets by the next night, for any sister to hear, and that last was one any sister would investigate. Fortunately, three wandering soldiers would hardly be present anywhere she was.

Prince Brys, a solid, green-eyed man, greeted her intimately in a large room panelled red and gold. Two of the Prince's married sisters were present with their husbands, and one of Ethenielle's with hers, the men in muted silks, the women in bright colours belted high beneath their breasts. Liveried servants offered sweetmeats and nuts. Moiraine thought she might get a sore neck from looking up; the shortest of the women was taller than Sivan, and they all stood very straight. Their necks would have bent a little for a sister, men's and women's

alike, but they knew themselves the equals of the Lady Moiraine.

The talk ranged from music and the best musicians among the nobles at court to the rigours of travel, from whether rumours of a man who could channel might be true to why so many Aes Sedai seemed to be about, and Moiraine found it difficult to maintain the expected light wittiness. She cared little for music and less for whoever played the instruments; in Cairhien, musicians were hired and forgotten. Everyone knew that travel was arduous, with no assurance of beds or decent food at the end of the day's twenty or thirty miles, and that was when the weather was good. Obviously some of the sisters were about because of rumours about the man, and others to tighten ties that might have loosened during the Aiel War, to make sure thrones and Houses understood they were still expected to meet their obligations to the Tower, both public and private. If an Aes Sedai had not come to the Aesdaishar yet, one soon would, reason enough for her to make heavy going of idle chat. That and thinking about other reasons for sisters to be wandering. The men put a good face on it, but she thought the women found her particularly dull.

When Brys's children were brought in, Moiraine felt a great relief. Having his children introduced to her was a sign of acceptance to his household, but more, it signalled the end of the audience. The eldest son, Antol, was in the south with Ethenielle as heir, leaving a lovely green-eyed girl of twelve named Jarene to lead in her sister and four brothers, formally aligned by age, though in truth the two youngest boys were still in skirts and carried by nursemaids. Stifling her impatience to find out what Sivan had learned, Moiraine complimented the children on their behaviour, encouraged them at their lessons. They must think her as dull as their elders did. Something a little less flat.

'And how did you earn your bruises, my Lord Diryk?' she asked, hardly listening to the boy's soberly delivered story of a fall. Until . . .

'My father says it was Lan's luck I wasn't killed, my Lady,' Diryk said, brightening out of his formality. 'Lan is the King of Malkier, and the luckiest man in the world, and the best swordsman. Except for my father, of course.'

'The King of Malkier?' Moiraine said, blinking. Diryk nodded vigorously and began explaining in a rush of words about Lan's exploits in the Blight and the Malkieri who had come to the Aesdaishar to follow him, until his father motioned him to silence.

'Lan is a king if he wishes it, my Lady,' Brys said. A very odd thing to say, and his doubtful tone made it odder. 'He keeps much to his rooms,' Brys sounded troubled about that, too, 'but you will meet him before you - my Lady, are you well?'

'Not very,' she told him. She had hoped for another meeting with Lan Mandragoran, planned for it, but not here! Her stomach was trying to twist into knots. 'I myself may keep to my rooms for a few days, if you will forgive me.'

He would, of course, and everyone was full of regret at missing her company and sympathy for the strain travelling must have put on her. Though she did hear one of the women murmur that southlanders must be very delicate.

A pale-haired young woman in green-and-red was waiting to show Moiraine back to her rooms. Elis bobbed a curtsy every time she spoke, which meant she bobbed quite often in the beginning. She had been told of Moiraine's 'faintness', and she asked every twenty paces whether Moiraine wished to sit and catch her breath, or have cool damp cloths brought to her rooms, or hot bricks for her feet, or smelling salts, or a dozen more sure cures for 'a light head', until Moiraine curtly told her to be quiet. The fool girl led on in silence, face blank.

Moiraine cared not a whit whether the woman was offended. All she wanted right then was to find Sivan with good news. With the boy in her arms, born on Dragonmount, and his mother packed to travel would be best of all. Most of all, though, she wanted herself out of the halls before she ran into Lan Mandragoran.

Worrying about him, she rounded a corner behind the serving girl and came face to face with Merean, blue-fringed shawl looped over her arms. The *shatayan* herself was guiding Merean, and behind the motherly-looking sister came a train of servants, one woman carrying her red riding gloves, another her fur-trimmed cloak, a third her dark velvet hat. Pairs of men bore wicker pack-hampers that could have been carried by one, and others had arms full of flowers. An Aes Sedai received more honour than a mere lady, however high her House.

Merean's eyes narrowed at the sight of Moiraine. 'A surprise to see you here,' she said slowly. 'By your dress, I take it you've given over your disguise? But no. Still no ring, I see.'

Moiraine was so startled at the woman's sudden appearance that she hardly heard what Merean said. 'Are you alone?' she blurted.

For a moment Merean's eyes became slits. 'Larelle decided to go her own way. South, I believe. More, I don't know.'

'It was Cadsuane I was thinking of,' Moiraine said, blinking in surprise. The more she had thought about Cadsuane, the more she had become convinced the woman must be Black Ajah. What surprised her was Larelle. Larelle had seemed bent on reaching Chachin, and without delay. Of course, plans could change, but suddenly Moiraine realized something that should have been obvious. Black sisters could lie. It was impossible - the Oaths *could* not be broken! - yet it had to be.

Merean moved close to Moiraine, and when Moiraine took a step back, she followed. Moiraine held herself erect, but she still came no higher than the other woman's chin. 'Are you so eager to see Cadsuane?' Merean said, looking down at her. Her voice was pleasant, her smooth face comforting, but her eyes were cold iron. Abruptly glancing at the servants, she seemed to realize they were not alone. The iron faded, but it did not disappear. 'Cadsuane was right, you know. A young woman who thinks she knows more than she does can land herself in very deep trouble. I suggest you be very still and very quiet until we can talk.' Her gesture for the *shatayan* to lead on was peremptory, and the dignified woman leaped to obey. A king or queen might find themselves in a *shatayan's* bad graces, but never an Aes Sedai.

Moiraine stared after Merean until she vanished around a corner far down the corridor. Everything Merean had just said could have come from one of Tamra's chosen. Black sisters could lie. Had Larelle changed her mind about Chachin? Or was she dead somewhere, like Tamra and the others? Suddenly Moiraine realized she was smoothing her skirts. Stilling her hands was easy, but she could not stop herself trembling faintly.

Elis was staring at her with her mouth open. 'You're Aes Sedai, too!' the woman squeaked, then gave a jump, taking Moiraine's wince for a grimace. 'I won't say a word to anyone, Aes Sedai,' she said breathlessly. 'I swear, by the Light and my father's grave!' As if every person behind Merean had not heard everything she had. They would not hold their tongues.

'Take me to Lan Mandragoran's apartments,' Moiraine told her. What was true at sunrise could change by noon, and so could what was necessary. She took the Great Serpent ring from her pouch and put it on her right hand. Sometimes, you had to gamble.

After a long walk, mercifully in silence, Elis rapped at a red door and announced to the grey-haired woman who opened it that the Lady Moiraine Damodred Aes Sedai wished to speak with King al'Lan Mandragoran. The woman had added her own touches to what Moiraine told her. King, indeed! Shockingly, the reply came back that Lord Mandragoran had no wish to speak with any Aes Sedai. The grey-haired woman looked scandalized, but closed the door firmly.

Elis stared at Moiraine wide-eyed. 'I can show my Lady Aes Sedai to her own rooms now,' she said uncertainly, 'if' She squeaked when Moiraine pushed open the door and went in.

The grey-haired serving woman and another a little younger leaped up from where they had been sitting, apparently darning shirts. A bony young man scrambled awkwardly to his feet beside the fireplace, looking to the women for instruction. They simply stared at Moiraine until she raised a questioning eyebrow. Then the greyhaired woman pointed to one of the two doors leading deeper into the apartments.

The door she pointed to led to a sitting room much like Moiraine's own, but all of the gilded chairs had been moved back against the walls and the flowered carpets rolled up. Shirtless, Lan was practising the sword in the cleared area. A small golden locket swung at his neck as he moved, his blade a blur. Sweat covered him, and more scars than she expected on a man so young. Not to mention a number of half-healed wounds crossed by dark stitches. He spun gracefully out of the forms to face her, the point of his sword grounding on the floor-tiles. He still did not quite meet her gaze, in that strange way he and Bukama had. His hair hung damply, clinging to his face despite the leather cord, but he was not breathing hard.

'You,' he growled. 'So you are Aes Sedai *and* a Damodred today. I've no time for your games, Cairhienin. I am waiting for someone.' Cold blue eyes flickered to the door behind her. Oddly, what appeared to be a cord woven of hair was tied around the inner handle in an elaborate knot. 'She will not be pleased to find another woman here.'

'Your lady love need have no fear of me,' Moiraine told him drily. 'For one thing, you are much too tall, and for another, I prefer men with at least a modicum of charm. And manners. I came for your help. There was

a pledge made, and held since the War of the Hundred Years, that Malkier would ride when the White Tower called. *I am Aes Sedai, and I call you!*

'You know the hills are high, but not how they lie,' he muttered as if quoting some Malkieri saying. Stalking across the room away from her, he snatched up his scabbard and sheathed the sword forcefully. 'I'll give you your help, if you can answer a question. I've asked Aes Sedai over the years, but they wriggled away from answering like vipers. If you are Aes Sedai, answer it.'

'If I know the answer, I will.' She would not tell him again that she was what she was, but she embraced *saidar*, and moved one of the gilded chairs out into the middle of the floor. She could not have lifted the thing with her hands, yet it floated easily on flows of Air, and would have had it been twice as heavy. Sitting, she rested her hands on crossed knees where the golden serpent on her finger was plain. The taller person had an advantage when both stood, but someone standing must feel they were being judged by someone sitting, especially an Aes Sedai.

He did not seem to feel anything of the kind. For the first time since she had met him, he met her eyes directly, and his stare was blue ice. 'When Malkier died,' he said in tones of quiet steel, 'Shienar and Arafel sent men. They could not stop the flood of Trollocs and Myrddraal, yet they came. Men rode from Kandor, and even Saldaea. They came too late, but they came.' Blue ice became blue fire. His voice did not change, but his knuckles grew white gripping his sword. 'For nine hundred years we rode when the White Tower called, but where was the Tower when Malkier died? If you are Aes Sedai, answer me that!'

Moiraine hesitated. The answer he wanted was Sealed to the Tower, taught to Accepted in history lessons yet forbidden to any except initiates of the Tower. But what was a penance alongside what she faced? 'Over a hundred sisters were ordered to Malkier,' she said more calmly than she felt. By everything she had been taught, she should ask a penance for what she had told him already. 'Even Aes Sedai cannot fly, however. They were too late.' By the time the first had arrived, the armies of Malkier were already broken by endless hordes of Shadowspawn, the people fleeing or dead. The death of Malkier had been hard and blood-soaked, and fast. 'That was before I was born, but I regret it deeply. And I regret that the Tower decided to keep their effort secret.' Better that the Tower be thought to have done nothing than to have it known Aes Sedai had tried and failed. Failure was a blow to stature, and mystery an armour the Tower needed. Aes Sedai had reasons of their own for what they did, and for what they did not do, and those reasons were known only to Aes Sedai. 'That is as much answer as I can give. More than I should have, more than any other sister ever will, I think. Will it suffice?'

For a time he simply looked at her, fire slowly fading to ice once more. His eyes fell away. 'Almost, I can believe,' he muttered finally, without saying what he almost believed. He gave a bitter laugh. 'What help can I give you?'

Moiraine frowned. She very much wanted time alone with this man, to bring him to heel, but that had to wait. 'There is another sister in the palace. Merean Redhill. I need to know where she goes, what she does, who she meets.' He blinked, but did not ask the obvious questions. Perhaps he knew he would get no answers, but his silence was still pleasing.

'I have been keeping to my rooms the past few days,' he said, looking at the door again. 'I do not know how much watching I can do.'

In spite of herself, she sniffed. The man promised help, then looked anxiously for his lady. Perhaps he was not what she had thought. But he was who she had. 'Not you,' she told him. Her visit here would be known throughout the Aesdaishar soon, if it was not already, and if he was noticed spying on Merean . . . That could be disaster even if the woman was as innocent as a babe. 'I thought you might ask one of the Malkieri I understand have gathered here to follow you. Someone with a sharp eye and a close tongue. This must be done in utter secrecy.'

'No one follows me,' he said sharply. Glancing at the door once more, he suddenly seemed weary. He did not slump, but he moved to the fireplace and propped his sword beside it with the care of a tired man. Standing with his back to her, he said, 'I will ask Bukama and Ryne to watch her, but I cannot promise for them. That is all I can do for you.'

She stifled a vexed sound. Whether it was all he could do or all he would, she had no leverage to force him. 'Bukama,' she said. 'Only him.' Going by how he had behaved around her, Ryne would be too busy staring at Merean to see or hear anything. That was if he did not confess what he was doing the moment Merean looked at him. 'And do not tell him why.'

His head whipped around, but after a moment he nodded. And again he did not ask the questions most people would have. Telling him how to get word to her, by notes passed to her maid Suki, she hoped she was not making a grave mistake.

Back in her own rooms, she discovered just how quickly news had spread. In the sitting room, Suan was offering a tray of sweetmeats to a tall, full-mouthed young woman in pale green silk, little older than a girl, with black hair that fell well below her hips and a small blue dot painted on her forehead about where the stone of Moiraine's kesiera hung. Suan's face was smooth, but her voice was tight as she made introductions. The Lady Iselle quickly showed why.

'Everyone in the palace is saying you are Aes Sedai,' she said, eyeing Moiraine doubtfully. She did not rise, much less curtsy, or even incline her head. 'If that is so, I need your assistance. I wish to go to the White Tower. My mother wants me to marry. I would not mind Lan as my *carneira* if mother were not already his, but when I marry, I think it will be one of my Warders. I will be Green Ajah.' She frowned faintly at Suan. 'Don't hover, girl. Stand over there until you are needed.' Suan took up a stance by the fireplace, back stiff and arms folded beneath her breasts. No real servant would have stood so - or frowned so - but Iselle no longer noticed her. 'Do sit down, Moiraine,' she went on with a smile, 'and I will tell you what I need of you. If you *are* Aes Sedai, of course.'

Moiraine stared. Invited to take a chair in her own sitting room. This silly child was certainly a suitable match for Lan when it came to arrogance. Her *carneira*? That meant 'first' in the Old Tongue, and plainly something else here. Not what it seemed to, of course; even these Malkieri could not be that peculiar! Sitting, she said drily, 'Choosing your Ajah should at least wait until I test you to see whether there is any point in sending you to the Tower. A few minutes will determine whether you can learn to channel, and your potential strength if you -'

The girl blithely broke in. 'Oh, I was tested years ago. The Aes Sedai said I would be very strong. I told her I was fifteen, but she learned the truth. I don't see why I could not go to the Tower at twelve if I wanted. Mother was furious. She has always said I was to be Queen of Malkier one day, but that means marrying Lan, which I would not want even if mother weren't his *carneira*. When you tell her you are taking me to the Tower, she will have to listen. Everyone knows that Aes Sedai take any woman they want for training, and no one can stop them.' That full mouth pursed. 'You *are* Aes Sedai, aren't you?'

Moiraine performed the rosebud exercise. 'If you want to go to Tar Valon, then go. I certainly do not have time to escort you. You will find sisters there about whom you can have no doubts. Suki, will you show the Lady Iselle out? No doubt she does not wish to delay in setting off before her mother catches her.'

The chit was all indignation, of course, but Moiraine wanted only to see the back of her, and Suan very nearly pushed her out into the corridor.

'That one,' Suan said as she came back dusting her hands, 'won't last a month if she can equal Cadsuane.' The Tower clung like iron bands to any woman who had the smallest chance of earning the shawl, but those who could not or would not learn did find themselves put out, and channelling was only part of what had to be learned.

'Sierin herself can toss her from the top of the Tower for all I care,' Moiraine snapped. 'Did you learn anything?'

It seemed that Suan had learned that the young footman knew how to kiss, a revelation that did not even pinken her cheeks, and aside from that, nothing whatsoever. Surprisingly, learning that Moiraine had approached Lan upset her more than Merean's appearance.

'Skin me and salt me if you don't take idiot risks, Moiraine. A man who claims the throne of a dead country is nine kinds of fool. He could be flapping his tongue about you right this minute to anybody who'll bloody listen! If Merean learns you're having her watched . . . Burn me!'

'He is many kinds of fool, Suan, but I do not think he ever "flaps his tongue". Besides, "you cannot win if you will not risk a copper", as you always tell me your father used to say. We have no choice but to take risks. With Merean here, time may be running out. You must reach the Lady Ines as quickly as you can.'

'I'll do what I can,' Suan muttered, and stalked out squaring her shoulders as if for a struggle. But she was smoothing her skirt over her hips, too.

Night had long since fallen and Moiraine was trying to read by lamplight when Suan returned. Moiraine set her book aside; she had been staring at the same page for the past hour. This time, Suan did have news,

delivered while digging through the dresses and shifts Mistress Dorelmin had made.

For one thing, she had been approached on her way back to Moiraine's rooms by 'a gristly old stork' who asked if she was Suki, then told her Merean had spent almost the entire day with Prince Brys before retiring to her apartments for the night. No clue there to anything. More importantly, Suan had been able to bring up Rahien in casual conversation with Cal. The footman had not been with the Lady Ines when the boy was born, but he did know the day, one day after the Aiel began their retreat from Tar Valon. Moiraine and Suan shared a long look over that. One day after Gitara Moroso had made her Foretelling of the Dragon's Rebirth and dropped dead from the shock of it. Dawn over the mountain, and born during the ten days before a sudden thaw melted the snow. Gitara had specifically mentioned the snow.

'Anyway,' Suan went on, beginning to make a bundle of clothes and stockings, 'I led Cal to believe I'd been dismissed from your service for spilling wine on your dress, and he's offered me a bed with the Lady Ines's servants. He thinks he might be able to get me a place with his Lady.' She snorted with amusement, then caught Moiraine's eyes and snorted again, more roughly. 'It isn't his bloody bed, Moiraine. And if it was, well, he has a gentle manner and the prettiest brown eyes you've ever seen. One of these days, you're going to find yourself ready to do more than dream about some man, and I hope I'm there to see it!'

'Do not talk nonsense,' Moiraine told her. The task in front of them was too important to spare thoughts for men. In the way Suan meant, at least. Merean had spent all day with Brys? Without going near Lady Ines? One of Tamra's chosen or Black Ajah, that made no sense, and it went beyond credibility to believe Merean was not one or the other. She was missing something, and that worried her. What she did not know could kill her. Worse, it could kill the Dragon Reborn in his cradle.

Lan slipped through the corridors of the Aesdaishar alone, using every bit of the skill he had learned in the Blight, avoiding the eyes of passersby. His own serving women took Edeyn's commands ahead of his, now, as though they believed that some part of Malkieri ways. She might have told them it was. He expected that anyone in the Aesdaishar wearing livery would tell Edeyn where to find him. He thought he knew where he was, now. Despite previous visits, he had got lost twice, without a guide. He felt a fool for wearing his sword. Steel was no use in this battle.

A flicker of movement made him flatten himself against the wall behind a statue of a woman clad in clouds, her arms full of flowers. Just in time. Two women came out of the crossing corridor ahead, pausing in close conversation. Iselle and the Aes Sedai, Merean. He was as still as the stone he hid behind.

He did not like skulking, but while Edeyn was untying the knot in his *daori* that had kept him penned for two days she had made it clear that she intended to announce his marriage to Iselle soon. Bukama had been right. Edeyn used his *daori* like reins, and he did not believe she would stop just because he married her daughter. The only thing to do when faced by an opponent you could not defeat was run, and he wanted to.

At a sharp motion from Merean, Iselle nodded eagerly and went back the way they had come. For a moment Merean watched her go, face unreadable in Aes Sedai serenity. Then, surprisingly, she followed, gliding in a way that made Iselle look awkward.

Lan did not waste time wondering what Merean was up to, any more than he had in wondering why Moiraine wanted her watched. A man could go mad trying to puzzle out Aes Sedai. Which Moiraine really must be, or Merean would have her howling up and down the corridors. Waiting long enough for the pair to be out of sight again, he moved quietly to the corner and peeked. They were both gone, so he hurried on. Aes Sedai were no concern of his today. He had to talk to Bukama.

Running would end Edeyn's schemes of marriage. If he avoided her long enough, she would find another husband for Iselle. Running would end Edeyn's dream of reclaiming Malkier; her support would fade like mist under a noon sun once people learned he was gone. Running would end many dreams. The man who had carried an infant tied to his back had a right to dreams, though. Duty was a mountain, but it had to be carried.

Ahead lay a long flight of broad, stone-railed stairs. He turned to start down, and suddenly he was falling. He just had time to go limp, and then he was bounding from step to step, tumbling head over heels, landing on the tiled floor at the bottom with a crash that drove the last remaining air from his lungs. Spots shimmered in front of his eyes. He struggled to breathe, to push himself up.

Servants appeared from nowhere, helping him dizzily to his feet, all exclaiming over his luck in not

killing himself in such a fall, asking whether he wanted to see one of the Aes Sedai for Healing. Frowning up the stairway, he murmured replies, anything in hope of making them go away. He thought he might be as bruised as he had ever been in his life, but bruises went away, and the last thing he wanted at that moment was a sister. Most men would have fought that fall and been lucky to end with half their bones broken. Something had jerked his ankles up there. Something had hit him between the shoulders. There was only one thing it could have been, however little sense it made. An Aes Sedai had tried to kill him.

'Lord Mandragoran!' A stocky man in the striped coat of a palace guard skidded to a halt and nearly fell over trying to bow while still moving. 'We've been looking for you everywhere, my Lord!' he panted. 'It's your man, Bukama! Come quickly, my Lord! He may still be alive!'

Cursing, Lan ran behind the guard, shouting for the man to go faster, but he was too late. Too late for the man who had carried an infant. Too late for dreams.

Guards crowding a narrow passage just off one of the practice yards squeezed back to let Lan through. Bukama lay face down, blood pooled around his mouth, the plain wooden hilt of a dagger rising from the dark stain on the back of his coat. His staring eyes looked surprised. Kneeling, Lan closed those eyes and murmured a prayer for the last embrace of the mother to welcome Bukama home.

'Who found him?' he asked, but he barely heard the jumbled replies about who and where and what. He hoped Bukama was reborn in a world where the Golden Crane flew on the wind, and the Seven Towers stood unbroken, and the Thousand Lakes shone like a necklace beneath the sun. How could he have let anyone get close enough to do this? Bukama could *feel* steel being unsheathed near him. Only one thing was sure. Bukama was dead because Lan had tangled him in an Aes Sedai's schemes.

Rising, Lan began to run. Not away from, though. Towards. And he did not care who saw him.

The muffled crash of the door in the anteroom and outraged shouts from the serving women lifted Moiraine from the chair where she had been waiting. For anything but this. Embracing *saidar*, she started from the sitting room, but before she reached the door, it swung open. Lan shook off the liveried women clinging to his arms, shut the door in their faces, and put his back to it, meeting Moiraine's startled gaze. Purpling bruises marred his face, and he moved as if he had been beaten. From outside came silence. Whatever he intended, they would be sure she could handle it.

Absurdly, she found herself fingering her beltknife. With the Power she could wrap him up like a child, however large he was, and yet . . . He did not glare. There certainly was no fire in those eyes. She wanted to step back. No fire, but death seared cold. That black coat suited him with its cruel thorns and stark gold blossoms.

'Bukama is dead with a knife in his heart,' he said calmly, 'and not an hour gone, someone tried to kill me with the One Power. At first I thought it must be Merean, but the last I saw of her, she was trailing after Iselle, and unless she saw me and wanted to lull me, she had no time. Few see me when I do not want to be seen, and I don't think she did. That leaves you.'

Moiraine winced, and only in part for the certainty in his tone. She should have known the fool girl would go straight to Merean. 'You would be surprised how little escapes a sister,' she told him. Especially if the sister was filled with *saidar*. 'Perhaps I should not have asked Bukama to watch Merean. She is very dangerous.' She was Black Ajah; Moiraine was certain of that, now. Sisters might make painful examples of people caught snooping, but they did not kill them. But what to do about her? Certainty was not proof, surely not that would stand up before the Amyrlin Seat. And if Sierin herself was Black . . . Not a worry she could do anything about now. What was the woman doing wasting any time at all with Iselle? 'If you care for the girl, I suggest you find her as quickly as possible and keep her away from Merean.'

Lan grunted. 'All Aes Sedai are dangerous. Iselle is safe enough for the moment; I saw her on my way here, hurrying somewhere with Brys and Diryk. Why did Bukama die, Aes Sedai? What did I snare him in for you?'

Moiraine flung up a hand for silence, and a tiny part of her was surprised when he obeyed. The rest of her thought furiously. Merean with Iselle. Iselle with Brys and Diryk. Merean had tried to kill Lan. Suddenly she saw a pattern, perfect in every line; it made no sense, but she did not doubt it was real. 'Diryk told me you are the luckiest man in the world,' she said, leaning towards Lan intently, 'and for his sake, I hope he was right. Where would Brys go for absolute privacy? Somewhere he would not be seen or heard.' It would have to be a

place he felt comfortable, yet isolated.

'There is a walk on the west side of the palace,' Lan said slowly, then his voice quickened. 'If there is danger to Brys, I must rouse the guards.' He was already turning, hand on the doorhandle.

'No!' she said. She still held the Power, and she prepared a weave of Air to seize him if necessary. 'Prince Brys will not appreciate having his guards burst in if Merean is simply talking to him.'

'And if she is not talking?' he demanded.

'We have no proof of anything against her, Lan. Suspicions against the word of an Aes Sedai.' His head jerked angrily, and he growled something about Aes Sedai that she deliberately did not hear. 'Take me to this walk, Lan. Let Aes Sedai deal with Aes Sedai. And let us hurry.' If Merean did any talking, Moiraine did not expect her to talk for long.

Hurry Lan surely did, long legs flashing as he ran. All Moiraine could do was gather her skirts high and run after him, ignoring the stares and murmurs of servants and others in the corridors, thanking the Light that the man did not outpace her. She let the Power fill her as she ran, till sweetness and joy bordered pain, and tried to plan what she would do, what she could do, against a woman considerably stronger than she, a woman who had been Aes Sedai more than a hundred years before her own great-grandmother was born. She wished she was not so afraid. She wished Sivan was with her.

The mad dash led through glittering state chambers, along statuarylined hallways, and suddenly they were into the open, the sounds of the palace left behind, on a long stone-railed walk twenty paces wide with a vista across the city roofs far below. A cold wind blew like a storm. Merean was there, surrounded by the glow of saidar, and Brys and Diryk, standing by the rail, twisting futilely against bonds and gags of Air. Iselle was frowning at the Prince and his son, and surprisingly, further down the walk stood a glowering Ryne.

'... and I could hardly bring Lord Diryk to you without his father,' Iselle was saying petulantly. 'I *did* make sure no one knows, but why -?'

Weaving a shield of Spirit, Moiraine hurled it at Merean with every shred of the Power in her, hoping against hope to cut the woman off from the Source. The shield struck and splintered. Merean was too strong, drawing too near her capacity.

The Blue sister - the Black sister - did not even blink. 'You did well enough killing the spy, Ryne,' she said calmly as she wove a gag of Air to stop up Iselle's mouth and bonds that held the girl stiff and wide-eyed. 'See if you can make certain of the younger one this time. You did say you are a better swordsman.'

Everything seemed to happen at once. Ryne rushed forward, scowling, the bells in braids chiming. Lan barely got his own sword out in time to meet him. And before the first clash of steel on steel, Merean struck at Moiraine with the same weave she herself had used, but stronger. In horror Moiraine realized that Merean might have sufficient strength remaining to shield her even while she was embracing as much of *saidar* as she could. Frantically she struck out with Air and Fire, and Merean grunted as severed flows snapped back into her. In the brief interval, Moiraine tried to slice the flows holding Diryk and the others, but before her weave touched Merean's, Merean sliced hers instead, and this time Merean's attempted shield actually touched her before she could cut it. Moiraine's stomach tried to tie itself in a knot.

'You appear too often, Moiraine,' Merean said as though they were simply chatting. She looked as if there were no more to it, serene and motherly, not in the slightest perturbed. 'I fear I must ask you how, and why.' Moiraine just managed to sever a weave of Fire that would have burned off her clothes and perhaps most of her skin, and Merean smiled, a mother amused at the mischief young women get up to. 'Don't worry, child. I'll Heal you to answer my questions.'

If Moiraine had had any lingering doubts that Merean was Black Ajah, that weave of Fire would have ended them. In the next moments she had more proof, weavings that made sparks dance on her dress and her hair rise, weavings that left her gasping for air that was no longer there, weavings she could not recognize yet was sure would leave her broken and bleeding if they settled around her, if she failed to cut them . . .

When she could, she tried again and again to cut the bonds holding Diryk and the others, to shield Merean, even to knock her unconscious. She knew she fought for her life - she would die if the other woman won, now or after Merean's questioning - but she never considered that loophole in the Oaths that held her. She had questions of her own for the woman, and the fate of the world might rest on the answers. Unfortunately, most of what she could do was defend herself, and that always on the brink. Her stomach was in a knot, and trying to make another. Holding three people bound, Merean was still a match for her, and maybe more. If only

Lan could distract the woman.

A hasty glance showed how unlikely that was. Lan and Ryne danced the forms, their blades like whirlwinds, but if there was a hair between their abilities, it rested with Ryne. Blood fanned down the side of Lan's face.

Grimly, Moiraine bore down, not even sparing the bit of concentration necessary to ignore the cold. Shivering, she struck at Merean, defended herself and struck again, defended and struck. If she could manage to wear the woman down, or . . .

'This is taking too long, don't you think, child?' Merean said. Diryk floated into the air, struggling against the bonds he could not see as he drifted over the railing. Brys's head twisted, following his son, and his mouth worked around his unseen gag.

'No!' Moiraine screamed. Desperately, she flung out flows of Air to drag the boy back to safety. Merean slashed them even as she released her own hold on him. Wailing, Diryk fell, and white light exploded in Moiraine's head.

Groggily she opened her eyes, the boy's fading shriek still echoing in her mind. She was on her back on the stone walk, her head spinning. Until that cleared, she had as much chance of embracing *saidar* as a cat did of singing. Not that it made any difference, now. She could see the shield Merean was holding on her, and even a weaker woman could maintain a shield once in place. She tried to rise, fell back, managed to push up on an elbow.

Only moments had passed. Lan and Ryne still danced their deadly dance to the clash of steel. Brys was rigid for more than his bonds, staring at Merean with such implacable hate it seemed he might break free on the strength of his rage. Iselle was trembling visibly, snuffling and weeping and staring wide-eyed at where the boy had fallen. Where Diryk had fallen. Moiraine made herself think the boy's name, flinched to recall his grinning enthusiasm. Only moments.

'You will hold a moment for me, I think,' Merean said, turning from Moiraine. Brys rose from the walk. The stocky man's face never changed, never stopped staring hatred at Merean.

Moiraine struggled to her knees. She could not channel. She had no courage left, no strength. Only determination. Brys floated over the railing. Moiraine tottered to her feet. Determination. That look of pure hate etched on his face, Brys fell, never making a sound. This had to end. Iselle lifted into the air, writhing frantically, throat working in a effort to scream past her gag. It had to end now! Stumbling, Moiraine drove her beltknife into Merean's back, blood spurting over her hands.

They fell to the paving stones together, the glow around Merean vanishing as she died, the shield on Moiraine vanishing. Iselle screamed, swaying where Merean's bonds had let her drop, atop the stone railing. Pushing herself to move, Moiraine scrambled across Merean's corpse, seized one of Iselle's flailing hands in hers just as the girl's slippers slid off into open air.

The jolt pulled Moiraine belly-down across the railing, staring down at the girl held by her blood-slick grip above a drop that seemed to go on for ever. It was all Moiraine could do to hold them where they were, teetering. If she tried to pull the girl up, they would both go over. Iselle's face was contorted, her mouth a rictus. Her hand slipped in Moiraine's grasp. Forcing herself to calm, Moiraine reach for the Source and failed. Staring down at those distant rooftops did not help her whirling head. Again she tried, but it was like trying to scoop up water with spread fingers. She would save one of the three, though, if the most useless of them. Fighting dizziness, she strove for *saidar*. And Iselle's hand slid out of her bloody fingers. All Moiraine could do was watch her fall, hand still stretched up as if she believed someone might still save her.

An arm pulled Moiraine away from the railing.

'Never watch a death you don't have to,' Lan said, setting her on her feet. His right arm hung at his side, a long slash laying open the blood-soaked sleeve and the flesh beneath, and he had other injuries besides the gash on his scalp that still trickled red down his face. Ryne lay on his back ten paces away, staring at the sky in sightless surprise. 'A black day,' Lan muttered. 'As black as ever I've seen.'

'A moment,' she told him, her voice unsteady. 'I am too dizzy to walk far, yet.' Her knees wavered as she walked to Merean's body. There would be no answers. The Black Ajah would remain hidden. Bending, she withdrew her beltknife and cleaned it on the traitor's skirts.

'You are a cool one, Aes Sedai,' Lan said flatly.

'As cool as I must be,' she told him. Diryk's scream rang in her ears. Iselle's face dwindled below her. 'It

seems Ryne was wrong as well as a Darkfriend. You were better than he.'

Lan shook his head slightly. 'He was better. But he thought I was finished, with only one arm. He never understood. You surrender after you're dead.'

Moiraine nodded. Surrender after you are dead. Yes.

It took a little while for her head to clear enough that she could embrace the Source again, and she had to put up with Lan's anxiety to let the *shatayan* know that Brys and Diryk were dead before word came that their bodies had been found on the rooftops. Understandably, he seemed less eager to inform the Lady Edeyn of her daughter's death. Moiraine was anxious about time, too, if not for the same reasons. She Healed him as soon as she was able. He gasped in shock as the complex weaves of Spirit, Air, and Water knit up his wounds, flesh writhing together into unscarred wholeness. Like anyone who had been Healed, he was weak afterwards, weak enough to catch his breath leaning on the stone rail. He would run nowhere for a while.

Carefully Moiraine floated Merean's body over that rail and down a little, close to the stone of the mountain. Flows of Fire, and flame enveloped the Black sister, flame so hot there was no smoke, only a shimmering in the air, and the occasional crack of a splitting rock.

'What are you -?' Lan began, then changed it to, 'Why?'

Moiraine let herself feel the rising heat, currents of air fit for a furnace. 'There is no proof she was Black Ajah, only that she was Aes Sedai.' The White Tower needed its armour of secrecy again, more than it had when Malkier died, but she could not tell him that. Not yet. 'I cannot lie about what happened here, but I can be silent. Will you be silent, or will you do the Shadow's work?'

'You are a very hard woman,' he said finally. That was the only answer he gave, but it was enough.

'I am as hard as I must be,' she told him. Diryk's scream. Iselle's face. There was still Ryne's body to dispose of, and the blood. As hard as she must be.

Next dawn found the Aesdaishar in mourning, white banners flying from every prominence, the servants with long white cloths tied to their arms. Rumours in the city already talked of portents foretelling the deaths, comets in the night, fires in the sky. People had a way of folding what they saw into what they knew and what they wanted to believe. The disappearance of a simple soldier, and even of an Aes Sedai, escaped notice alongside grief.

Returning from destroying Merean's belongings - after searching in vain for any clue to other Black sisters -Moiraine stepped aside for Edeyn Arrel, who glided down the corridor in a white gown, her hair cut raggedly short. Whispers said she intended to retire from the world. Moiraine thought she already had. The woman's staring eyes looked haggard and old. In a way, they looked much as her daughter's did, in Moiraine's mind.

When Moiraine entered her apartments, Suan leaped up from a chair. It seemed weeks since Moiraine had seen her. 'You look like you reached into the bait well and found a fangfish,' she growled. 'Well, it's no surprise. I always hated mourning when I knew the people. Anyway, we can go whenever you're ready. Rahien was born in a farmhouse almost two miles from Dragonmount. Merean hasn't been near him, as of this morning. I don't suppose she'll harm him on suspicion even if she is Black.'

Not the one. Somehow, Moiraine had almost expected that. 'Merean will not harm anyone, Suan. Put that mind of yours to a puzzle for me.' Settling in a chair, she began with the end, and hurried through despite Suan's gasps and demands for more detail. It was almost like living it again. Getting to what had led her to that confrontation was a relief. 'She wanted Diryk dead most of all, Suan; she killed him first. And she tried to kill Lan. The only thing those two had in common was luck. Diryk survived a fall that should have killed him, and everyone says Lan is the luckiest man alive or the Blight would have killed him years ago. It makes a pattern, but the pattern looks crazy to me. Maybe your blacksmith is even part of it. And Josef Najima, back in Canluum, for all I know. He was lucky, too. Puzzle it out for me if you can. I think it is important, but I cannot see how.'

Suan strode back and forth across the room, kicking her skirt and rubbing her chin, muttering about 'men with luck' and 'the blacksmith rose suddenly' and other things Moiraine could not make out. Suddenly she stopped dead and said, 'She never went near Rahien, Moiraine. The Black Ajah knows the Dragon was Reborn, but they don't bloody know *when!* Maybe Tamra managed to keep it back, or maybe they were too rough and she died before they could pry it out of her. That has to be it!' Her eagerness turned to horror. 'Light! They're

killing any man or boy who *might* be able to channel! Oh, burn me, thousands could die, Moiraine. Tens of thousands.'

It did make a terrible sense. Men who could channel seldom knew what they were doing, at least in the beginning. At first, they often just seemed to be lucky. Events favoured them, and frequently, like the blacksmith, they rose to prominence with unexpected suddenness. Sivan was right. The Black Ajah had begun a slaughter.

'But they do not know to look for a boychild,' Moiraine said. As hard as she had to be. 'An infant will show no signs.' Not until he was sixteen at the earliest. No man on record had begun channelling before that, and some not for ten years or more later. 'We have more time than we thought. Not enough to be careless, though. Any sister can be Black. I think Cadsuane is. They know others are looking. If one of Tamra's searchers locates the boy and they find her with him, or if they decide to question one of them instead of killing her as soon as it is convenient . . .' Sivan was staring at her. 'We still have the task,' Moiraine told her.

'I know,' Sivan said slowly. 'I just never thought. Well, when there's work to do, you haul nets or gut fish.' That lacked her usual force, though. 'We can be on our way to Arafel before noon.'

'You go back to the Tower,' Moiraine said. Together, they could search no faster than one could alone, and if they had to be apart, what better place for Sivan than working for Cetalia Delarme, seeing the reports of all the Blue Ajah eyes-and-ears? The Blue was a small Ajah, but every sister said it had a larger network than any other. While Moiraine hunted for the boy, Sivan could learn what was happening in every land, and knowing what she was looking for, she could spot any sign of the Black Ajah or the Dragon Reborn. Sivan truly could see sense when it was pointed out to her, though it took some effort this time, and when she agreed, she did it with a poor grace.

'Cetalia will use me to caulk draughts for running off without leave,' she grumbled. 'Burn me! Hung out on a drying rack in the Tower! Moiraine, the politics are enough to make you sweat buckets in midwinter! I hate it!' But she was already pawing through the trunks to see what she could take with her for the ride back to Tar Valon. 'I suppose you warned that fellow Lan. Seems to me, he deserves it, much good it'll do him. I heard he rode out an hour ago, heading for the Blight, and if that doesn't kill him - where are you going?'

'I have unfinished business with the man,' Moiraine said over her shoulder. She had made a decision about him the first day she knew him, and she intended to keep it.

In the stable where Arrow was kept, silver marks tossed like pennies got the mare saddled and bridled almost while the coins were still in the air, and she scrambled on to the animal's back without a care that her skirts pushed up to bare her legs above the knee. Digging tier heels in, she galloped out of the Aesdaishar and north through the city, making people leap aside and once setting Arrow to leap cleanly over an empty wagon with a driver too slow to move out of her way. She left a tumult of shouts and shaken fists behind.

On the road north from the city, she slowed enough to ask wagondrivers heading the other way whether they had seen a Malkieri on a bay stallion, and was more than a little relieved the first time she got a yes. The man could have gone in fifty directions after crossing the moat bridge. And with an hour's lead . . . She would catch him if she had to follow him into the Blight!

'A Malkieri?' The skinny merchant in a dark blue cloak looked startled. 'Well, my guards told me there's one up there.' Twisting on his wagon-seat, he pointed to a grassy hill a hundred paces off the road. Two horses stood in plain sight at the crest, one a packhorse, and the thin smoke of a fire curled into the breeze.

Lan barely looked up when she dismounted. Kneeling beside the remains of a small fire, he was stirring the ashes with a long twig. Strangely, the smell of burned hair hung in the air. 'I had hoped you were done with me,' he said.

'Not quite yet,' she told him. 'Burning your future? It will sorrow a great many, I think, when you die in the Blight.'

'Burning my past,' he said, rising. 'Burning memories. A nation. The Golden Crane will fly no more.' He started to kick dirt over the ashes, then hesitated and bent to scoop up damp soil and pour it out of his hands almost formally. 'No one will sorrow for me when I die, because those who would be dead already. Besides, all men die.'

'Only fools choose to die before they must. I want you to be my Warder, Lan Mandragoran.'

He stared at her unblinking, then shook his head. 'I should have known it would be that. I have a war to fight, Aes Sedai, and no desire to help you weave White Tower webs. Find another.'

'I fight the same war as you against the Shadow. Merean was Black Ajah.' She told him all of it, from Gitara's Foretelling in the presence of the Amyrlin Seat and two Accepted to what she and Sivan had reasoned out. For another man, she would have left most unsaid, but there were few secrets between Warder and Aes Sedai. For another man, she might have softened it, but she did not believe hidden enemies frightened him, not even when they were Aes Sedai. 'You said you burned your past. Let the past have its ashes. This is the same war, Lan. The most important battle yet in that war. And this one, you can win.'

For a long time he stood staring north, towards the Blight. She did not know what she would do if he refused. She had told him more than she would have anyone but her Warder.

Suddenly he turned, sword flashing out, and for an instant she thought he meant to attack her. Instead he sank to his knees, the sword lying bare across his hands. 'By my mother's name, I will draw as you say "draw" and sheathe as you say "sheathe". By my mother's name, I will come as you say "come" and go as you say "go".' He kissed the blade and looked up at her expectantly. On his knees, he made any king on a throne look meek. She would have to teach him some humility for his own sake. And for a pond's sake.

'There is a little more,' she said, laying hands on his head.

The weave of Spirit was one of the most intricate known to Aes Sedai. It wove around him, settled into him, vanished. Suddenly she was aware of him, in the way that Aes Sedai were of their Warders. His emotions were a small knot in the back of her head, all steely hard determination, sharp as his blade's edge. She knew the muted pain of old injuries, tamped down and ignored. She would be able to draw on his strength at need, to find him however far away he was. They were bonded.

He rose smoothly, sheathing his sword, studying her. 'Men who weren't there call it the Battle of the Shining Walls,' he said abruptly. 'Men who were, call it the Blood Snow. No more. They know it was a battle. On the morning of the first day, I led nearly five hundred men. Kandori, Saldaeans, Domani. By evening on the third day, half were dead or wounded. Had I made different choices, some of those dead would be alive. And others would be dead in their places. In war, you say a prayer for your dead and ride on, because there is always another fight over the next horizon. Say a prayer for the dead, Moiraine Sedai, and ride on.'

Startled, she came close to gaping. She had forgotten that the bond's flow worked both ways. He knew her emotions, too, and apparently could reason out hers far better than she could his. After a moment, she nodded, though she did not know how many prayers it would take to clear her mind.

Handing her Arrow's reins, he said, 'Where do we ride first?'

'Back to Chachin,' she admitted. 'And then Arafel, and. . .' So few names remained that were easy to find. 'The world, if need be. We win this battle, or the world dies.'

Side by side they rode down the hill and turned south. Behind them the sky rumbled and turned black, another late storm rolling down from the Blight.