

THE GATHERING STORM

The background of the cover is a detailed illustration of a large, multi-story wooden building with a steep, gabled roof. The building has several windows with decorative shutters and a balcony. In the foreground, a man in a red tunic with a purple sash and blue trousers stands with his right arm raised in a fist, looking upwards. To his left, a woman in a brown dress with a blue bodice stands looking towards him. The sky is a mix of orange and purple, suggesting a sunset or sunrise.

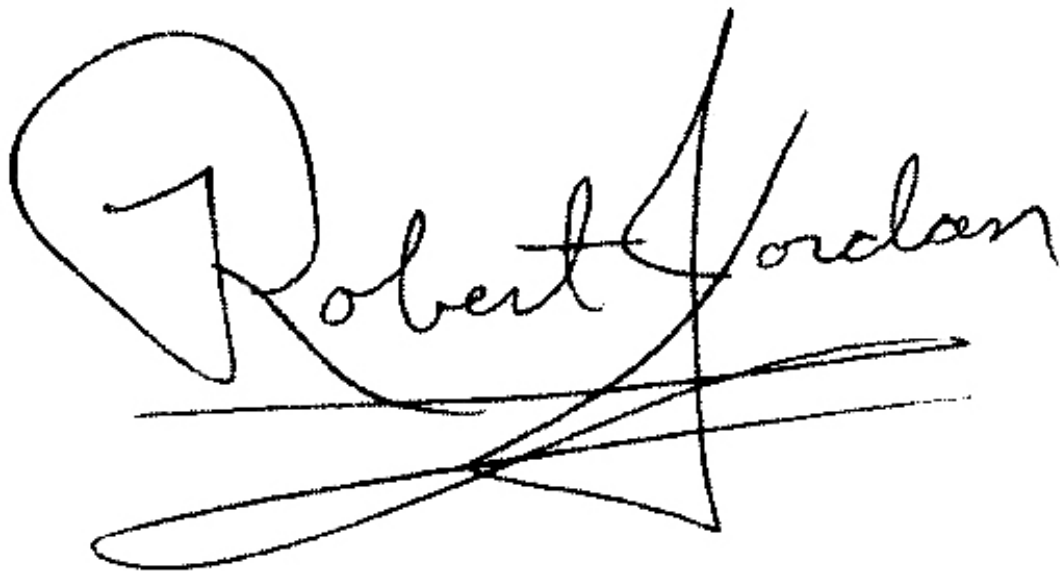
Sequel
to the #1
New York Times
Bestseller
*Knife
of Dreams*

Book Twelve
of
*THE WHEEL
OF TIME*

Robert Jordan
Brandon Sanderson

THE GATHERING STORM

Book Twelve of The Wheel of Time

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Robert Jordan". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looped initial "R". Below the signature, there are several horizontal and diagonal lines that appear to be scribbles or a stylized flourish.

**ROBERT JORDAN
AND
BRANDON SANDERSON**

FOREWORD

In November 2007, I received a phone call that would change my life forever. Harriet McDougal, wife and editor of the late Robert Jordan, called to ask me if I would complete the last book of *The Wheel of Time*.

For those who did not know Mr. Jordan had passed away, it pains me to be the one to break the news. I remember how I felt when—while idly browsing the Internet on September 16, 2007—I discovered that he had died. I was shocked, stunned, and disheartened. This wonderful man, a hero to me in my writing career, was gone. The world suddenly became a different place.

I first picked up *The Eye of the World* in 1990, when I was a teenage fantasy addict visiting my corner bookstore. I became a fan instantly and eagerly awaited *The Great Hunt*. Over the years, I've read the books numerous times, often re-reading the entire series when a new book was released. Time passed, and I decided I wanted to become a fantasy author—influenced, in large part, by how much I loved *The Wheel of Time*. And yet, never did I think that I would one day get that phone call from Harriet. It came to me as a complete surprise. I had not asked, applied, or dared wish for this opportunity—though when the request was made, my answer was immediate. I love this series as I have loved none other, and the characters feel like old, dear friends from my childhood.

I cannot replace Robert Jordan. Nobody could write this book as well as he could have. That is a simple fact. Fortunately, he left many notes, outlines, completed scenes, and dictated explanations with his wife and assistants. Before his passing, he asked Harriet to find someone to complete the series for his fans. He loved you all very much and spent the very last weeks of his life dictating events for the final volume. It was to be called *A Memory of Light*.

Eighteen months later, we are here. Mr. Jordan promised that the final book would be big. But the manuscript soon grew prohibitively huge; it would be three times the size of a regular *Wheel of Time* book, and the decision was made by Harriet and Tor to split *A Memory of Light* into thirds. There were several excellent breaking points that would give a full and complete story in each third. You may think of *The Gathering Storm* and its two followers as the three volumes of *A Memory of Light* or as the final three books of *The Wheel of Time*. Both are correct.

As of this writing, I am halfway done with the second third. We are working as quickly as is reasonable, and we don't want you to have to wait too long to get the ending we were all promised nearly twenty years ago. (Mr. Jordan

did write this ending himself before he passed away, and I have read it. And it is fantastic.) I have not tried to imitate Mr. Jordan's style. Instead, I've adapted my style to be appropriate to *The Wheel of Time*. My main goal was to stay true to the souls of the characters. The plot is, in large part, Robert Jordan's, though many of the words are mine. Imagine this book as the product of a new director working on some of the scenes of a movie while retaining the same actors and script.

But this is a big project, and it will take time to complete. I beg your patience as we spend these next few years perfecting this story. We hold in our hands the ending of the greatest fantasy epic of our time, and I intend to see it done *right*. I intend to remain true to Mr. Jordan's wishes and notes. My artistic integrity, and love for the books, will not let me do anything less. In the end, I let the words herein stand as the best argument for what we are doing.

This is not my book. It is Robert Jordan's book, and to a lesser extent, it is your book.

Thank you for reading.

BRANDON SANDERSON
June 2009

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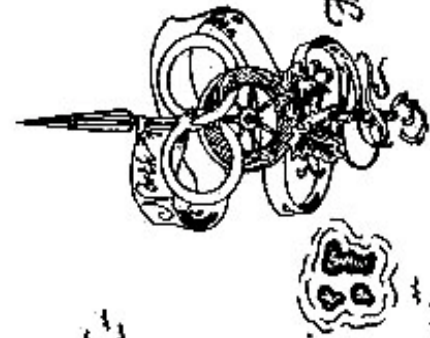
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Ravens and crows. Rats. Mists and clouds. Insects and corruption. Strange events and odd occurrences. The ordinary twisted and strange. Wonders!

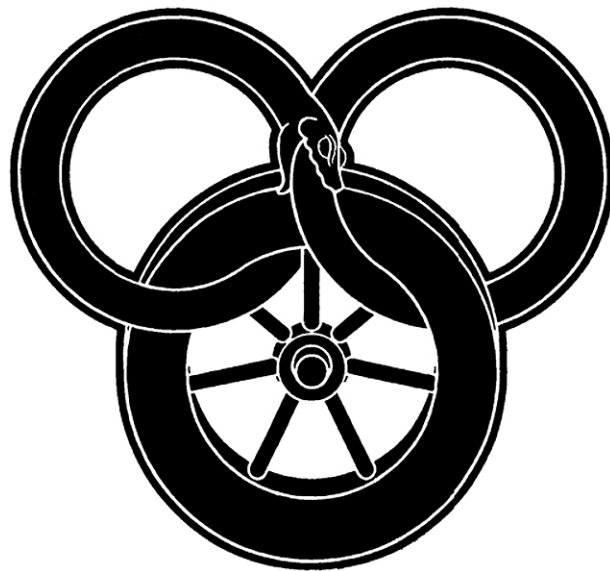
The dead are beginning to walk, and some see them. Others do not, but more and more, we all fear the night.

These have been our days. They rain upon us beneath a dead sky, crushing us with their fury, until as one we beg: “Let it begin!”

—Journal of the Unknown Scholar,
entry for The Feast of Freia, 1000 NE



THE GATHERING STORM



PROLOGUE



What the Storm Means

Renald Fanwar sat on his porch, warming the sturdy blackoak chair crafted for him by his grandson two years before. He stared northward. At the black and silver clouds.

He'd never seen their like before. They blanketed the entire horizon to the north, high in the sky. They weren't gray. They were *black* and *silver*. Dark, rumbling thunderheads, as dark as a root cellar at midnight. With striking silver light breaking between them, flashes of lightning that gave off no sound.

The air was *thick*. Thick with the scents of dust and dirt. Of dried leaves and rain that refused to fall. Spring had come. And yet his crops didn't grow. Not a sprout had dared poke through the earth.

He rose slowly from his chair, wood creaking, chair rocking softly behind him, and walked up to the edge of the porch. He chewed on his pipe, though its fire had gone out. He couldn't be bothered to relight it. Those clouds transfixed him. They were so black. Like the smoke of a brushfire, only no brushfire smoke ever rose that high up in the air. And what to make of *silver* clouds? Bulging between the black ones, like places where polished steel shone through metal crusted with soot.

He rubbed his chin, glancing down at his yard. A small, whitewashed fence contained a patch of grass and shrubs. The shrubs were dead now, every one of them. Hadn't lasted through that winter. He'd need to pull them out soon. And the grass . . . well, the grass was still just winter thatch. Not even any weeds sprouted.

A clap of thunder shook him. Pure, sharp, like an enormous crash of metal against metal. It rattled the windows of the house, shook the porch boards, seemed to vibrate his very bones.

He jumped back. That strike had been close—perhaps on his property. He itched to go inspect the damage. Lightning fire could destroy a man, burn him out of his land. Up here in the Borderlands, so many things were unintentional tinder—dry grass, dry shingles, dry seed.

But the clouds were still distant. That strike *couldn't* have been on his property. The silver and black thunderheads rolled and boiled, feeding and consuming themselves.

He closed his eyes, calming himself, taking a deep breath. Had he imagined the thunder? Was he going off the side, as Gaffin always joked? He opened his eyes.

And the clouds were right there, directly above his house.

It was as if they had suddenly rolled forward, intending to strike while his gaze was averted. They dominated the sky now, sweeping distantly in either direction, massive and overwhelming. He could almost feel their weight pressing the air down around him. He drew in a breath that was heavy with sudden humidity, and his brow prickled with sweat.

Those clouds churned, dark black and silver thunderheads shaking with white blasts. They suddenly boiled downward, like the funnel cloud of a twister, coming for him. He cried out, raising a hand, as a man might before a powerfully bright light. That blackness. That endless, suffocating *blackness*. It would take him. He knew.

And then the clouds were gone.

His pipe hit the porch's floorboards, clicking softly, tossing burned tabac out in a spray across the steps. He hadn't realized he'd let it slip free. Renald hesitated, looking up at empty blue sky, realizing that he was cringing at nothing.

The clouds were off on the horizon again, some forty leagues distant. They thundered softly.

He picked up his pipe with a shaking hand, spotted from age, tanned from years spent in the sun. *Just a trick of your mind, Renald*, he told himself. *You're going off the side, sure as eggs is eggs.*

He was on edge because of the crops. That had him on edge. Though he spoke optimistic words for the lads, it just wasn't natural. Something should have sprouted by now. He'd farmed that land for forty years! Barley didn't take this long to sprout. Burn him, but it didn't. What was going on in the world these days? Plants couldn't be depended on to sprout, and clouds didn't stay where they should.

He forced himself to sit back down in his chair, legs shaking. *Getting old, I am. . .* he thought.

He'd worked a farm all of his life. Farmsteading in the Borderlands was not

easy, but if you worked hard, you could grow a successful life while you grew strong crops. "A man has as much luck as he has seeds in the field," his father had always said.

Well, Renald was one of the most successful farmers in the area. He'd done well enough to buy out the two farms beside his, and he could run thirty wagons to market each fall. He now had six good men working for him, plowing the fields, riding the fences. Not that he didn't have to climb down in the muck every day and show them what good farming was all about. You couldn't let a little success ruin you.

Yes, he'd worked the land, lived the land, as his father always used to say. He understood the weather as well as a man could. Those clouds weren't natural. They rumbled softly, like an animal growling on a dark night. Waiting. Lurking in the nearby woods.

He jumped at another crash of thunder that seemed too close. Were those clouds forty leagues away? Is that what he'd thought? Looked more like ten leagues away, now that he studied them.

"Don't get like that," he grumbled at himself. His own voice sounded good to him. Real. It was nice to hear something other than that rumbling and the occasional creak of shutters in the wind. Shouldn't he be able to hear Auaine inside, getting supper ready?

"You're tired. That's it. Tired." He fished in his vest pocket and pulled out his tabac pouch.

A faint rumbling came from the right. At first, he assumed it was the thunder. However, this rumbling was too grating, too regular. That wasn't thunder. It was wheels turning.

Sure enough, a large, oxen-drawn wagon crested Mallard's Hill, just to the east. Renald had named that hill himself. Every good hill needed a name. The road was Mallard's Road. So why not name the hill that too?

He leaned forward in his chair, pointedly ignoring those clouds as he squinted toward the wagon, trying to make out the driver's face. Thulin? The smith? What was he doing, driving a wagon laden halfway to the heavens? He was supposed to be working on Renald's new plow!

Lean for one of his trade, Thulin was still twice as muscled as most farmhands. He had the dark hair and tan skin of a Shienaran, and kept his face shaved after their fashion, but he did not wear the topknot. Thulin's family might trace its roots back to Borderland warriors, but he himself was just a simple country man like the rest of them. He ran the smithy over in Oak Water, five miles to the east. Renald had enjoyed many a game of stones with the smith during winter evenings.

Thulin was getting on—he hadn't seen as many years as Renald, but the last few winters had prompted Thulin to start speaking of retirement. Smithing wasn't an old man's trade. Of course, neither was farming. *Were* there really any old man's trades?

Thulin's wagon approached along the packed earthen road, approaching Renald's white-fenced yard. *Now, that's odd*, Renald thought. Behind the wagon trailed a neat string of animals: five goats and two milkcows. Crates of black-feathered chickens were tied on the outside of the wagon, and the bed of the wagon itself was piled full of furniture, sacks and barrels. Thulin's youthful daughter, Mirala, sat on the seat with him, next to his wife, a golden-haired woman from the south. Twenty-five years Thulin's wife, but Renald still thought of Gallanha as "that southern girl."

The whole family was in the wagon, leading their best livestock. Obviously on the move. But where? Off to visit relatives, perhaps? He and Thulin hadn't played a round of stones in . . . oh, three weeks now. Not much time for visiting, what with the coming of spring and the hurried planting. Someone would need to mend the plows and sharpen the scythes. Who would do it if Thulin's smithy went cold?

Renald tucked a pinch of tabac into his pipe as Thulin pulled the wagon up beside Renald's yard. The lean, gray-haired smith handed the reins to his daughter, then climbed down from the wagon, feet throwing puffs of dust into the air when he hit the ground. Behind him the distant storm still brewed.

Thulin pushed open the fence gate, then strode up to the porch. He looked distracted. Renald opened his mouth to give greeting, but Thulin spoke first.

"I buried my best anvil in Gallanha's old strawberry patch, Renald," the big smith said. "You remember where that is, don't you? I packed my best set of tools there as well. They're well greased and inside my best chest, lined to keep it dry. That should keep the rust off of them. For a time at least."

Renald closed his mouth, holding his pipe half-full. If Thulin was burying his anvil . . . well, it meant he wasn't planning to come back for a while. "Thulin, what—"

"If I don't return," Thulin said, glancing northward, "would you dig my things out and see that they're cared for? Sell them to someone who cares, Renald. I wouldn't have just anyone beating that anvil. Took me twenty years to gather those tools, you know."

"But Thulin!" Renald sputtered. "Where are you going?"

Thulin turned back to him, leaning one arm on the porch railing, those brown eyes of his solemn. "There's a storm coming," he said. "And so I figure I've got to head on to the north."

“Storm?” Renald asked. “That one on the horizon, you mean? Thulin, it looks bad—burn my bones, but it does—but there’s no use running from it. We’ve had bad storms before.”

“Not like this, old friend,” Thulin said. “This ain’t the sort of storm you ignore.”

“Thulin?” Renald asked. “What are you talking about?”

Before he could answer, Gallanha called from the wagon box. “Did you tell him about the pots?”

“Ah,” Thulin said. “Gallanha polished up that set of copper-bottom pots that your wife always liked. They’re sitting on the kitchen table, waiting for Auaine, if she wants to go claim them.” With that, Thulin nodded to Renald and began to walk back toward the wagon.

Renald sat, stupefied. Thulin always *had* been a blunt one; he favored saying his mind, then moving on. That was part of what Renald liked about him. But the smith could also pass through a conversation like a boulder rolling through a flock of sheep, leaving everyone dazed.

Renald scrambled up, leaving his pipe on the chair and following Thulin down into the yard and to the wagon. *Burn it*, Renald thought, glancing to the sides, noticing the brown grass and dead shrubs again. He’d worked hard on that yard.

The smith was checking on the chicken crates tied to the sides of his vehicle. Renald caught up to him, reaching out a hand, but Gallanha distracted him.

“Here, Renald,” she said from the wagon box. “Take these.” She held out a basket of eggs, one lock of golden hair straying from her bun. Renald reached over to take the basket. “Give these to Auaine. I know you’re short on chickens on account of those foxes last fall.”

Renald took the basket of eggs. Some were white, some were brown. “Yes, but where are you *going*, Gallanha?”

“North, my friend,” Thulin said. He walked past, laying a hand on Renald’s shoulder. “There will be an army gathering, I figure. They’ll need smiths.”

“Please,” Renald said, gesturing with the basket of eggs. “At least take a few minutes. Auaine just put some bread in, one of those thick honey loaves that you like. We can discuss this over a game of stones.”

Thulin hesitated.

“We’d better be on the move,” Gallanha said softly. “That storm is coming.”

Thulin nodded, then climbed up into the wagon. “You might want to come north too, Renald. If you do, bring everything you can.” He paused. “You’re

good enough with the tools you have here to do some small metalwork, so take your best scythes and turn them into polearms. Your two best scythes; now don't go skimping around with anything that's a second best or a third best. Get your best, because it's the weapon you're going to use."

Renald frowned. "How do you know that there will be an army? Thulin, burn me, I'm no soldier!"

Thulin continued as if he hadn't heard the comments. "With a polearm you can pull somebody off of a horse and stab them. And, as I think about it, maybe you can take the third best and make yourself a couple of swords."

"What do I know about making a sword? Or about using a sword, for that matter?"

"You can learn," Thulin said, turning north. "Everyone will be needed, Renald. Everyone. They're coming for us." He glanced back at Renald. "A sword really isn't all that tough to make. You take a scythe blade and straighten it out, then you find yourself a piece of wood to act as a guard, to keep the enemy's blade from sliding down and cutting your hand. Mostly you'll just be using things that you've already got."

Renald blinked. He stopped asking questions, but he couldn't stop thinking them. They bunched up inside his brain like cattle all trying to force their way through a single gate.

"Bring all your stock, Renald," Thulin said. "You'll eat them—or your men will eat them—and you'll want the milk. And if you don't, then there'll be men you can trade with for beef or mutton. Food will be scarce, what with everything spoiling so much and the winter stores having run low. Bring everything you've got. Dried beans, dried fruit, everything."

Renald leaned back against the gate to his yard. He felt weak and limp. Finally, he forced out just one question. "Why?"

Thulin hesitated, then stepped away from the wagon, laying a hand on Renald's shoulder again. "I'm sorry to be so abrupt. I . . . well, you know how I am with words, Renald. I don't know what that storm is. But I know what it means. I've never held a sword, but my father fought in the Aiel War. I'm a Borderlander. And that storm means the end is coming, Renald. We need to be there when it arrives." He stopped, then turned and looked to the north, watching those building clouds as a farmhand might watch a poisonous snake he found in the middle of the field. "Light preserve us, my friend. We need to be there."

And with that, he removed his hand and climbed back into the wagon. Renald watched them ease off, nudging the oxen into motion, heading north. Renald watched for a long time, feeling numb.

The distant thunder cracked, like the sound of a whip, smacking against the hills.

The door to the farmhouse opened and shut. Auaine came out to him, gray hair in a bun. It had been that color for years now; she'd grayed early, and Renald had always been fond of the color. Silver, more than gray. Like the clouds.

"Was that Thulin?" Auaine asked, watching the distant wagon throw up dust. A single black chicken feather blew across the roadway.

"Yes."

"And he didn't stay, even to chat?"

Renald shook his head.

"Oh, but Gallanha sent eggs!" She took the basket and began to transfer the eggs into her apron to carry them inside. "She's such a dear. Leave the basket there on the ground; I'm sure she'll send someone for it."

Renald just stared northward.

"Renald?" Auaine asked. "What's gotten into you, you old stump?"

"She polished up her pots for you," he said. "The ones with the copper bottoms. They're sitting on her kitchen table. They're yours if you want them."

Auaine fell silent. Then he heard a sharp sound of cracking, and he looked over his shoulder. She had let her apron grow slack, and the eggs were slipping free, plopping to the ground and cracking.

In a very calm voice, Auaine asked, "Did she say anything else?"

He scratched his head, which hadn't much hair left to speak of. "She said the storm was coming and they had to head north. Thulin said we should go too."

They stood for another moment. Auaine pulled up the edge of her apron, preserving the majority of the eggs. She didn't spare a glance for those that had fallen. She was just staring northward.

Renald turned. The storm had jumped forward again. And it seemed to have grown *darker* somehow.

"I think we ought to listen to them, Renald," Auaine said. "I'll . . . I'll go fix up what we'll need to bring with us from the house. You can go around back and gather the men. Did they say how long we'll be gone?"

"No," he said. "They didn't even really say why. Just that we need to go north for the storm. And . . . that this is the end."

Auaine inhaled sharply. "Well, you just get the men ready. I'll take care of the house."

She bustled inside, and Renald forced himself to turn away from the storm. He rounded the house and entered the barnyard, calling the farmhands together. They were a stout lot, good men, all of them. His own sons had sought their

fortunes elsewhere, but his six workers were nearly as close to him as sons. Merk, Favidan, Rinnin, Veshir and Adamad gathered round. Still feeling dazed, Renald sent two to gather up the animals, two more to pack what grain and provisions they had left from the winter and the final man off to fetch Geleni, who had gone into the village for some new seed, just in case the planting had gone bad on account of their stores.

The five men scattered. Renald stood in the farmyard for a moment, then went into the barn to fetch his lightweight forge and pull it out into the sunlight. It wasn't just an anvil, but a full, compact forge, made for moving. He had it on rollers; you couldn't work a forge in a barn. All that dust could take fire. He heaved the handles, wheeling it out to the alcove set off to the side of the yard, built from good bricks, where he could do minor repairs when he needed to.

An hour later, he had the fire stoked. He wasn't as skilled as Thulin, but he'd learned from his father that being able to handle a little of your own forgework made a big difference. Sometimes, you couldn't squander the hours it would take to go to town and back just to fix a broken hinge.

The clouds were still there. He tried not to look at them as he left the forge and headed into the barn. Those clouds were like eyes, peeping over his shoulder.

Inside the barn, light sprinkled down through cracks in the wall, falling on dust and hay. He'd built the structure himself some twenty-five years back. He kept planning to replace some of those warped roofing planks, but now there wouldn't be time.

At the tool wall, he reached for his third-best scythe, but stopped. Taking a deep breath, he took the best scythe off the wall instead. He walked back out to the forge and knocked the haft off the scythe.

As he tossed the wood aside, Veshir—eldest of his farmhands—approached, pulling a pair of goats. When Veshir saw the scythe blade on the forge, his expression grew dark. He tied the goats to a post, then trotted over to Renald, but said nothing.

How to make a polearm? Thulin had said they were good for yanking a man off his horse. Well, he would have to replace the snath with a longer straight shaft of ashwood. The flanged end of the shaft would extend beyond the heel of the blade, shaped into a crude spearpoint and clad with a piece of tin for strength. And then he would have to heat the blade and bang off the toe about halfway, making a hook that could tug a man off his horse and maybe cut him at the same time. He slid the blade into the burning coals to heat it, then began to tie on his apron.

Veshir stood there for a minute or so, watching. Finally, he stepped up, taking Renald by the arm. "Renald, what are we doing?"

Renald shook his arm free. “We’re going north. The storm is coming and we’re going north.”

“We’re going north for just a storm? It’s insanity!”

It was nearly the same thing Renald had said to Thulin. Distant thunder sounded.

Thulin was right. The crops . . . the skies . . . the food going bad without warning. Even before he’d spoken to Thulin, Renald had known. Deep within, he’d known. This storm would not pass overhead then vanish. It had to be confronted.

“Veshir,” Renald said, turning back to his work, “you’ve been a hand on this farm for . . . what, fifteen years now? You’re the first man I hired. How well have I treated you and yours?”

“You’ve done me well,” Veshir said. “But burn me, Renald, you’ve never decided to *leave* the farm before! These crops, they’ll wither to dust if we leave them. This ain’t no southerner wetfarm. How can we just go off?”

“Because,” Renald said, “if we don’t leave, then it won’t matter if we planted or not.”

Veshir frowned.

“Son,” Renald said, “you’ll do as I say, and that’s all we’ll have of it. Go finish gathering the stock.”

Veshir stalked away, but he did as he was told. He was a good man, if hotheaded.

Renald pulled the blade out of the heat, the metal glowing white. He laid it against the small anvil and began to beat on the knobby section where heel met beard, flattening it. The sound of his hammer on the metal seemed louder than it should have been. It rang like the pealing thunder, and the sounds blended. As if each beat of his hammer was itself a piece of the storm.

As he worked, the peals seemed to form words. Like somebody muttering in the back of his head. The same phrase over and over.

The storm is coming. The storm is coming. . . .

He kept on pounding, keeping the edge on the scythe, but straightening the blade and making a hook at the end. He still didn’t know why. But it didn’t matter.

The storm was coming and he had to be ready.

Watching the bowlegged soldiers tie Tanera’s blanket-wrapped body across a saddle, Falendre fought the desire to begin weeping again, the desire to vomit. She was senior, and had to maintain some composure if she expected the four

other surviving *sul'dam* to do so. She tried to tell herself she had seen worse, battles where more than a single *sul'dam* had died, more than one *damane*. That brought her too near thinking of exactly how Tanera and her Miri met their deaths, though, and her mind shied from it.

Huddling by her side, Nenci whimpered as Falendre stroked the *damane's* head and tried to send soothing feelings through the *a'dam*. That often seemed to work, but not so well today. Her own emotions were too roiled. If only she could forget that the *damane* was shielded, and by whom. By what. Nenci whimpered again.

“You will deliver the message as I directed you?” a man said behind her.

No, not just any man. The sound of his voice stirred the pool of acid in her belly. She made herself turn to face him, made herself meet those cold, hard eyes. They changed with the angle of his head, now blue, now gray, but always like polished gemstones. She had known many hard men, but had she ever known one hard enough to lose a hand and moments later take it as if he had lost a glove? She bowed formally, twitching the *a'dam* so that Nenci did the same. So far they had been treated well for prisoners under the circumstances, even to being given washwater, and supposedly they would not remain prisoners much longer. Yet with this man, who could say what might make that change? The promise of freedom might be part of some scheme.

“I will deliver your message with the care it requires,” she began, then stumbled over her tongue. What honorific did she use for him? “My Lord Dragon,” she finished hurriedly. The words dried her tongue, but he nodded, so it must have sufficed.

One of the *marath'damane* appeared through that impossible hole in the air, a young woman with her hair in a long braid. She wore enough jewelry for one of the Blood, and of all things, a red dot in the middle of her forehead. “How long do you mean to stay here, Rand?” she demanded as if the hard-eyed young man were a servant rather than who he was. “How close to Ebou Dar are we here? The place is full of Seanchan, you know, and they probably fly *raken* all around it.”

“Did Cadsuane send you to ask that?” he said, and her cheeks colored faintly. “Not much longer, Nynaeve. A few minutes.”

The young woman shifted her gaze to the other *sul'dam* and *damane*, all taking their lead from Falendre, pretending there were no *marath'damane* watching them, and especially no men in black coats. The others had straightened themselves as best they could. Surya had washed the blood from her face, and from her Tabi's face, and Malian had tied large compresses on them that made them appear to be wearing odd hats. Ciar had managed to clean off most of the

vomit she had spilled down the front of her dress.

“I still think I should Heal them,” Nynaeve said abruptly. “Hits to the head can cause odd things that don’t come on right away.”

Surya, her face hardening, moved Tabi behind her as if to protect the *damane*. As if she could. Tabi’s pale eyes had widened in horror.

Falendre raised a pleading hand toward the tall young man. Toward the Dragon Reborn, it seemed. “Please. They will receive medical aid as soon as we reach Ebou Dar.”

“Give over, Nynaeve,” the young man said. “If they don’t want Healing, they don’t want it.” The *marath’damane* scowled at him, gripping her braid so hard that her knuckles turned white. He turned his own attention back to Falendre. “The road to Ebou Dar lies about an hour east of here. You can reach the city by nightfall if you press. The shields on the *damane* will evaporate in about half an hour. Is that right for the *saidar*-woven shields, Nynaeve?” The woman scowled at him in silence. “Is that right, Nynaeve?”

“Half an hour,” she replied finally. “But none of this is right, Rand al’Thor. Sending those *damane* back. It isn’t right, and you know it.”

For a moment, his eyes were even colder. Not harder. That would have been impossible. But for that long moment, they seemed to hold caverns of ice. “Right was easy to find when all I had to care for was a few sheep,” he said quietly. “Nowadays, sometimes it’s harder to come by.” Turning away, he raised his voice. “Logain, get everyone back through the gateway. Yes, yes, Merise. I’m not trying to command you. If you’ll deign to join us, though? It will be closing soon.”

Marath’damane, the ones who called themselves Aes Sedai, began filing through that mad opening in the air, as did the black-coated men, the Asha’man, all mingling with the hook-nosed soldiers. Several of those finished tying Tanera to the saddle of the horse. The beasts had been provided by the Dragon Reborn. How odd, that he should give them gifts after what had happened.

The hard-eyed young man turned back to her. “Repeat your instructions.”

“I am to return to Ebou Dar with a message for our leaders there.”

“The Daughter of the Nine Moons,” the Dragon Reborn said sternly. “You will deliver my message to her.”

Falendre stumbled. She was not in any way worthy to speak to one of the Blood, let alone the High Lady, daughter of the Empress, might she live forever! But this man’s expression allowed no argument. Falendre would find a way. “I will deliver your message to her,” Falendre continued. “I will tell her that . . . that you bear her no malice for this attack, and that you desire a meeting.”

“I *still* desire one,” the Dragon Reborn said.

As far as Falendre knew, the Daughter of the Nine Moons had never known about the original meeting. It had been arranged in secret by Anath. And that was why Falendre *knew* for certain that this man must be the Dragon Reborn. For only the Dragon Reborn himself could face one of the Forsaken and not only survive, but come out the victor.

Was that really what she had been? One of the Forsaken? Falendre's mind reeled at the concept. Impossible. And yet, here was the Dragon Reborn. If he lived, if he walked the land, then the Forsaken would, too. She was muddled, her thoughts going in circles, she knew. She bottled up her terror—she would deal with that later. She needed to be in control.

She forced herself to meet those frozen gemstones this man had for eyes. She had to preserve some dignity if only to reassure the four other surviving *sul'dam*. And the *damane*, of course. If the *sul'dam* lost composure again, there would be no hope for the *damane*.

"I will tell her," Falendre said, managing to keep her voice even, "that you *still* desire a meeting with her. That you believe there must be peace between our peoples. And I am to tell her that Lady Anath was . . . was one of the Forsaken."

To the side, she saw some of the *marath'damane* push Anath through the hole in the air, maintaining a stately bearing despite her captivity. She always *had* tried to dominate above her station. Could she really be what this man said she was?

How was Falendre to face the *der'sul'dam* and explain this tragedy, this terrible mess? She itched to be away from it, to find someplace to hide.

"We *must* have peace," the Dragon Reborn said. "I will see it happen. Tell your mistress that she can find me in Arad Doman; I will quell the battle against your forces there. Let her know that I give this as a sign of good faith, just as I release you out of good faith. It is no shame to be manipulated by one of the Forsaken, particularly not . . . that creature. In a way, I rest more easily, now. I worried that one of them would have infiltrated the Seanchan nobility. I should have guessed that it would be Semirhage. She always preferred a challenge."

He spoke of the Forsaken with an incredible sense of familiarity, and it gave Falendre chills.

He glanced at her. "You may go," he said, then walked over and passed through the rip in the air. What she would give to have that traveling trick for Nenci. The last of the *marath'damane* passed through the hole, and it closed, leaving Falendre and the others alone. They were a sorry group. Talha was still crying, and Malian looked ready to sick up. Several of the others had had bloodied faces before they washed, and faint red smears and flakes of crusted blood still marred their skin. Falendre was glad she had been able to avoid

accepting Healing for them. She had seen one of those *men* Healing members of the Dragon's party. Who knew what taint it would leave on a person to be beneath those corrupt hands?

"Be strong," she commanded the others, feeling far more uncertain than she sounded. He had actually let her free! She'd barely dared hope for that. Best to be away soon. Very soon. She chivvied the others onto the horses he had given, and within minutes they were riding south, toward Ebou Dar, each *sul'dam* riding with her companion *damane* at her side.

The events of this day could mean having her *damane* stripped from her, being forbidden to hold the *a'dam* ever again. With Anath gone, punishment would be demanded of someone. What would High Lady Suroth say? *Damane* dead, the Dragon Reborn insulted.

Surely losing access to the *a'dam* was the worst that could happen to her. They wouldn't make one such as Falendre *da'covale*, would they? The thought made the bile twist inside of her again.

She would have to explain the events of this day very carefully. There *had* to be a way she could present these matters in a way that would save her life.

She had given her word to the Dragon to speak directly to the Daughter of the Nine Moons. And she would. But she might not do so immediately. Careful consideration would have to be given. Very careful consideration.

She leaned in close to her horse's neck, nudging her mount forward, ahead of the others. That way, they wouldn't see the tears of frustration, pain and terror in her eyes.

Tylee Khirgan, Lieutenant-General of the Ever Victorious Army, sat her horse atop a forested hilltop, looking northward. Such a different place this land was. Her homeland, Maram Kashor, was a dry island on the very southeastern tip of Seanchan. The lumma trees there were straight, towering monsters, with fronds sprouting from the top like the hair crest of a member of the High Blood.

The things that passed for trees in this land were gnarled, twisting, branching shrubs by comparison. Their limbs were like the fingers of old soldiers, gone arthritic from years holding the sword. What had the locals called these plants? Brushwood trees? So odd. To think that some of her ancestors might have come from this place, traveling with Luthair Paendrag to Seanchan.

Her army marched down the road below, throwing dust into the air. Thousands upon thousands of men. Fewer than she'd had before, but not by many. It had been two weeks since her fight with the Aiel, where Perrin Aybara's plan had worked impressively. Fighting alongside a man like him was always a

bittersweet experience. Sweet for the sheer genius of it. Bitter for the worry that one day, they would face each other on the battlefield. Tylee was not one who enjoyed a challenge in a fight. She'd always preferred to win straight out.

Some generals said that never struggling meant never being forced to improve. Tylee figured that she and her men would do *their* improving on the practice field, and leave the struggling to her enemies.

She would not like to face Perrin. No, she would not. And not just because she was fond of him.

Slow hoofbeats sounded on the earth. She glanced to the side as Mishima rode his horse, a pale gelding, up next to hers. He had his helm tied to his saddle, and his scarred face was thoughtful. They were a pair, the two of them. Tylee's own face bore its share of old scars.

Mishima saluted her, more respectful now that Tylee had been raised to the Blood. That particular message, delivered by *raken*, had been an unexpected one. It was an honor, and one she still wasn't accustomed to.

"Still mulling over the battle?" Mishima asked.

"I am," Tylee said. Two weeks, and still it dominated her mind. "What do you think?"

"Of Aybara, you mean?" Mishima asked. He still spoke to her like a friend, even if he kept himself from meeting her eyes. "He is a good soldier. Perhaps too focused, too driven. But solid."

"Yes," Tylee said, then shook her head. "The world is changing, Mishima. In ways we cannot anticipate. First Aybara, and then the oddities."

Mishima nodded thoughtfully. "The men don't want to speak of them."

"The events have happened too often to be the work of delusion," Tylee said. "The scouts are seeing *something*."

"Men don't just vanish," Mishima said. "You think it's the One Power?"

"I do not know what it is," she said. She glanced over the trees around her. Some trees she'd passed earlier had begun to send out spring growth, but not a one of these had done so. They looked skeletal, though the air was warm enough for it to be planting season already. "Do they have trees like this in Halamak?"

"Not exactly like them," Mishima said. "But I've seen their like before."

"Should they have budded by now?"

He shrugged. "I'm a soldier, General Tylee."

"I hadn't noticed," she said dryly.

He grunted. "I mean that I don't pay attention to trees. Trees don't bleed. Perhaps they should have budded, but perhaps not. Few things make sense on this side of the ocean. Trees that don't bud in spring, that's just another oddity. Better that than more *marath'damane* acting like they were of the Blood,

everyone bowing and scraping to them.” He shuddered visibly.

Tylee nodded, but she didn’t share his revulsion. Not completely. She wasn’t certain what to think of Perrin Aybara and his Aes Sedai, let alone his Asha’man. And she didn’t know much more about trees than Mishima. But it felt to her that they should have started to bud. And those men the scouts kept seeing in the fields, how could they vanish so quickly, even with the One Power?

The quartermaster had opened up one of their packs of travel rations today and found only dust. Tylee would have started a search for a thief or a prankster if the quartermaster hadn’t insisted that he’d checked that pack just moments before. Karm was a solid man; he’d been her quartermaster for years. He did not make mistakes.

Rotting food was so common here. Karm blamed the heat of this strange land. But travel rations couldn’t rot or spoil, at least not this un-predictably. The omens were all bad, these days. Earlier today, she’d seen two dead rats lying on their backs, one with a tail in the mouth of the other. It was the worst omen she’d ever seen in her life, and it still chilled her to think of it.

Something was happening. Perrin hadn’t been willing to speak of it much, but she saw a weight upon him. He knew much more than he had spoken.

We can’t afford to be fighting these people, she thought. It was a rebellious thought, one she wouldn’t speak to Mishima. She didn’t dare ponder it. The Empress, might she live forever, had ordered that this land be reclaimed. Suroth and Galgan were the Empire’s chosen leaders in the venture, until the Daughter of the Nine Moons revealed herself. While Tylee couldn’t know the High Lady Tuon’s thoughts, Suroth and Galgan were united in their desire to see this land subdued. It was practically the only thing they *did* agree upon.

None of them would listen to suggestions that they should be looking for allies among the people of this land, rather than enemies. Thinking about it was close to treason. Insubordination, at least. She sighed and turned to Mishima, prepared to give the order to begin scouting for a place to camp for the night.

She froze. Mishima had an arrow through his neck, a wicked, barbed thing. She hadn’t heard it strike. He met her eyes, stunned, trying to speak and only letting out blood. He slid from the saddle and collapsed in a heap as something enormous charged through the underbrush beside Tylee, cracking gnarled branches, throwing itself at her. She barely had time to pull free her sword and shout before Duster—a good, solid war-horse that had never failed her in battle—reared in panic, tossing her to the ground.

That probably saved her life, as her attacker swung a thick-bladed sword, cutting into the saddle where Tylee had been. She scrambled to her feet, armor clanking, and screamed the alert. “To arms! Attack!”

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