

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

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

PROLOGUE

(Serpent and Wheel)

The First Message

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

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

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

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

gnashing their teeth. Their blades failed after a time and had to be replaced, no matter that raids into the Borderlands had been curtailed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You may leave now, Halfman." He did not want the thing here to see the ecstasy overcome him. The ecstasy, and the pain.

Shaidar Haran did not move.

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

DEMANDRED.

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

DEMANDRED. HOW FARES THIS WORLD?

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

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

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

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

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

SO YOU SHALL.

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

WOULD YOU BE NAE'BLIS?

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

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

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

Unmoving, the Myrddraal watched him.

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

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

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

Nynaeve smoothed her own skirts to soothe herself. Her dress was plain white wool, with seven bands of color at the hem, one for each Ajah. An Accepted's dress. It annoyed her more than she could ever have imagined. She would much rather have been in the green silk she had packed away. She was willing to admit her acquired taste for fine clothes, privately at least, but her choice of that particular dress was only for comfort — it was thin, light — not because green seemed one of Lan's favorite colors. Not at all. Idle dreaming of the worst sort. An Accepted who put on anything except the banded white would soon learn she was a *long* step below Aes Sedai. Firmly she put all that out of her head. She was not here to fret over fripperies. He liked blue, too. No!

Delicately she probed with the One Power, first at Suan, then Leane. In a manner of speaking, she was not channeling at all. She could not channel a scrap unless angry, could not even sense the True Source. Yet it came to the same thing. Fine filaments of *saidar*, the

female half of the True Source, sifted through the two women at her weaving. They just did not originate with her.

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

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

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

Three heads swiveled toward her; three sets of eyes glared with fury. Sivan and Leane had been Aes Sedai until they were stilled during the coup in the White Tower that put Elaida on the Amyrlin Seat. Stilled. A word to cause shudders. Never to channel again. But always to remember, and know the loss. Always to sense the True Source and know you could never touch it again. Stilling could not be Healed any more than death.

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

Marigan shrank back against the wall, eyes glittering and fixed on Nynaeve. Fear and hate rolled through the bracelet, but they always did to one degree or another. Captives seldom loved their captors, even — perhaps especially — when they knew they deserved captivity and worse. The problem was that Marigan also said severing — stilling — could not be Healed. Oh, she was full of claims that anything else except death could be Healed in the

Age of Legends, that what the Yellow Ajah called Healing now was only the crudest hasty battlefield work. But try to pin her down on specifics, on even a hint of how, and you found nothing there. Marigan knew as much about Healing as Nynaeve did about blacksmithing, which was that you stuck metal in hot coals and hit it with a hammer. Certainly not enough to make a horseshoe. Or Heal much beyond a bruise.

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

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

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

"Just put it on, Sivan."

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

Marigan shifted uneasily. So far only two who knew about her could use the bracelet. Four would give more chances for questions. On the surface she seemed to be cooperating fully, but how much was she hiding? As much as she could, Nynaeve was sure.

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

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

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

"But there is something there to be Healed," Nynaeve insisted, "or you'd feel nothing through the bracelet."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The young woman who shut the splintery wooden door behind her took no notice of the commotion she had caused. Tall and straight in an Accepted's banded white dress, with sun-gold curls nestled on her shoulders, she looked spitting mad. Even with her face tight with anger and dripping sweat she somehow managed to look beautiful, though; it was a knack Elayne had. "Do you know what they're doing? They are sending an embassy to... to

Caemlyn! And they refuse to let me go! Sheriam *forbade* me to mention it again. Forbade me even to *speak* of it!"

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

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

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

"But — "

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

"I don't believe that!" Elayne snapped.

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

"They *have*," Elayne forced in. "There's rebellion in the west."

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

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

Siuan's loud snort made Nynaeve jump. "You've been Accepted long enough to know better." Elayne had as much potential as had been seen in a thousand years. Not as much as Nynaeve, if she ever learned to channel at will, but still enough to make any Aes Sedai's eyes light up. Elayne's nose wrinkled — she knew very well that if she had already been on the Lion Throne, the Aes Sedai still would have gotten her away for training, by asking if possible, by stuffing her into a barrel if necessary — and she opened her mouth, but Siuan did not even slow down. "True, they'd not mind you taking the throne sooner than later; there

hasn't been a Queen who was openly Aes Sedai in far too long. But they won't let you go until you're a full sister, and even then, because you *are* Daughter-Heir and will be Queen soon, they won't let you near the Dragon bloody Reborn until they know how far they can trust him. Especially since this... *amnesty* of his." Her mouth twisted sourly around the word, and Leane grimaced.

Nynaeve's tongue curdled, too. She had been brought up to fear any man who could channel, fated to go mad and, before the Shadow-tainted male half of the Source killed him horribly, bring terror to everyone around him. But Rand, whom she had watched grow up, was the Dragon Reborn, born both as a sign that the Last Battle was coming and to fight the Dark One in that battle. The Dragon Reborn; humanity's only hope — and a man who could channel. Worse, reports were that he was trying to gather others like him. Of course, there could not be many. Any Aes Sedai would hunt down one of those — the Red Ajah did little else — but they found few, far fewer than once, according to the records.

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

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

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

That made Nynaeve wince. Moiraine was the Aes Sedai who had brought her and Rand out of the Two Rivers and changed their lives. Her and Rand and Egwene and Mat and Perrin. She had wanted for so long to make Moiraine pay for what she had done to them that losing her was like losing a piece of herself. But Moiraine was dead in Cairhien, taking Lanfear with her; she was fast becoming a legend among the Aes Sedai here, the only Aes