

The Eye of the World

Chapter 1

An Empty Road

The Wheel of Time turns, and Ages come and pass, leaving memories that become legend. Legend fades to myth, and even myth is long forgotten when the Age that gave it birth comes again. In one Age, called the Third Age by some, an Age yet to come, an Age long past, a wind rose in the Mountains of Mist. The wind was not the beginning. There are neither beginnings nor endings to the turning of the Wheel of Time. But it was a beginning.

Born below the ever cloud-capped peaks that gave the mountains their name, the wind blew east, out across the Sand Hills, once the shore of a great ocean, before the Breaking of the World. Down it flailed into the Two Rivers, into the tangled forest called the Westwood, and beat at two men walking with a cart and horse down the rock-strewn track called the Quarry Road. For all that spring should have come a good month since, the wind carried an icy chill as if it would rather bear snow.

Gusts plastered Rand al'Thor's cloak to his back, whipped the earth-colored wool around his legs, then streamed it out behind him. He wished his coat were heavier, or that he had worn an extra shirt. Half the time when he tried to tug the cloak back around him it caught on the quiver swinging at his hip. Trying to hold the cloak one-handed did not do much good anyway; he had his bow in the other, an arrow nocked and ready to draw.

As a particularly strong blast tugged the cloak out of his hand, he glanced at his father over the back of the shaggy brown mare. He felt a little foolish about wanting to reassure himself that Tam was still there, but it was that kind of day. The wind howled when it rose, but aside from that, quiet lay heavy on the land. The soft creak of the axle sounded loud by comparison. No birds sang in the forest, no squirrels chattered from a branch. Not that he expected them, really; not this spring.

Only trees that kept leaf or needle through the winter had any green about them. Snarls of last year's bramble spread brown webs over stone outcrops under the trees. Nettles numbered most among the few weeds; the rest were the sorts with sharp burrs or thorns, or stinkweed, which left a rank smell on the unwary boot that crushed it. Scattered white patches of snow still dotted the ground where tight clumps of trees kept deep shade. Where sunlight did reach, it held neither strength nor warmth. The pale sun sat above the

trees to the east, but its light was crisply dark, as if mixed with shadow. It was an awkward morning, made for unpleasant thoughts.

Without thinking he touched the nock of the arrow; it was ready to draw to his cheek in one smooth movement, the way Tam had taught him. Winter had been bad enough on the farms, worse than even the oldest folk remembered, but it must have been harsher still in the mountains, if the number of wolves driven down into the Two Rivers was any guide. Wolves raided the sheep pens and chewed their way into barns to get the cattle and horses. Bears had been after the sheep, too, where a bear had not been seen in years. It was no longer safe to be out after dark. Men were the prey as often as sheep, and the sun did not always have to be down.

Tam was taking steady strides on the other side of Bela, using his spear as a walking staff, ignoring the wind that made his brown cloak flap like a banner. Now and again he touched the mare's flank lightly, to remind her to keep moving. With his thick chest and broad face, he was a pillar of reality in that morning, like a stone in the middle of a drifting dream. His sun-roughened cheeks might be lined and his hair have only a sprinkling of black among the gray, but there was a solidness to him, as though a flood could wash around him without uprooting his feet. He stumped down the road now impassively. Wolves and bears were all very well, his manner said, things that any man who kept sheep must be aware of, but they had best not try to stop Tam al'Thor getting to Emond's Field.

With a guilty start Rand returned to watching his side of the road, Tam's matter-of-factness reminding him of his task. He was a head taller than his father, taller than anyone else in the district, and had little of Tam in him physically, except perhaps for a breadth of shoulder. Gray eyes and the reddish tinge to his hair came from his mother, so Tam said. She had been an outlander, and Rand remembered little of her aside from a smiling face, though he did put flowers on her grave every year, at Bel Tine, in the spring, and at Sunday, in the summer.

Two small casks of Tam's apple brandy rested in the lurching cart, and eight larger barrels of apple cider, only slightly hard after a winter's curing. Tam delivered the same every year to the Winespring Inn for use during Bel Tine, and he had declared that it would take more than wolves or a cold wind to stop him this spring. Even so they had not been to the village for weeks. Not even Tam traveled much these days. But Tam had given his word about the brandy and cider, even if he had waited to make delivery until the day before Festival. Keeping his word was important to Tam. Rand was just glad to get away from the farm, almost as glad as about the coming of Bel Tine.

As Rand watched his side of the road, the feeling grew in him that he was being watched. For a while he tried to shrug it off. Nothing moved or made a sound among the trees,

except the wind. But the feeling not only persisted, it grew stronger. The hairs on his arms stirred; his skin prickled as if it itched on the inside.

He shifted his bow irritably to rub at his arms, and told himself to stop letting fancies take him. There was nothing in the woods on his side of the road, and Tam would have spoken if there had been anything on the other. He glanced over his shoulder ... and blinked. Not more than twenty spans back down the road a cloaked figure on horseback followed them, horse and rider alike black, dull and ungleaming.

It was more habit than anything else that kept him walking backward alongside the cart even while he looked.

The rider's cloak covered him to his boot tops, the cowl tugged well forward so no part of him showed. Vaguely Rand thought there was something odd about the horseman, but it was the shadowed opening of the hood that fascinated him. He could see only the vaguest outlines of a face, but he had the feeling he was looking right into the rider's eyes. And he could not look away. Queasiness settled in his stomach. There was only shadow to see in the hood, but he felt hatred as sharply as if he could see a snarling face, hatred for everything that lived. Hatred for him most of all, for him above all things.

Abruptly a stone caught his heel and he stumbled, breaking his eyes away from the dark horseman. His bow dropped to the road, and only an outthrust hand grabbing Bela's harness saved him from falling flat on his back. With a startled snort the mare stopped, twisting her head to see what had caught her.

Tam frowned over Bela's back at him. "Are you all right, lad?"

"A rider," Rand said breathlessly, pulling himself upright. "A stranger, following us."

"Where?" The older man lifted his broad-bladed spear and peered back warily.

"There, down the ..." Rand's words trailed off as he turned to point. The road behind was empty. Disbelieving, he stared into the forest on both sides of the road. Bare-branched trees offered no hiding place, but there was not a glimmer of horse or horseman. He met his father's questioning gaze. "He was there. A man in a black cloak, on a black horse."

"I wouldn't doubt your word, lad, but where has he gone?"

"I don't know. But he was there." He snatched up the fallen bow and arrow, hastily checked the fletching before renocking, and half drew before letting the bowstring relax. There was nothing to aim at. "He was."

Tam shook his grizzled head. "If you say so, lad. Come on, then. A horse leaves hoof prints, even on this ground." He started toward the rear of the cart, his cloak whipping in the wind. "If we find them, we'll know for a fact he was there. If not ... well, these are days to make a man think he's seeing things."

Abruptly Rand realized what had been odd about the horseman, aside from his being there at all. The wind that beat at Tam and him had not so much as shifted a fold of that

black cloak. His mouth was suddenly dry. He must have imagined it. His father was right; this was a morning to prickle a man's imagination. But he did not believe it. Only, how did he tell his father that the man who had apparently vanished into thin air wore a cloak the wind did not touch?

With a worried frown he peered into the woods around them; it looked different than it ever had before. Almost since he was old enough to walk, he had run loose in the forest. The ponds and streams of the Waterwood, beyond the last farms east of Emond's Field, were where he had learned to swim. He had explored into the Sand Hills — which many in the Two Rivers said was bad luck — and once he had even gone to the very foot of the Mountains of Mist, him and his closest friends, Mat Cauthon and Perrin Aybara. That was a lot further afield than most people in Emond's Field ever went; to them a journey to the next village, up to Watch Hill or down to Deven Ride, was a big event. Nowhere in all of that had he found a place that made him afraid. Today, though, the Westwood was not the place he remembered. A man who could disappear so suddenly could reappear just as suddenly, maybe even right beside them.

"No, father, there's no need." When Tam stopped in surprise, Rand covered his flush by tugging at the hood of his cloak. "You're probably right. No point looking for what isn't there, not when we can use the time getting on to the village and out of this wind."

"I could do with a pipe," Tam said slowly, "and a mug of ale where it's warm." Abruptly he gave a broad grin. "And I expect you're eager to see Egwene."

Rand managed a weak smile. Of all things he might want to think about right then, the Mayor's daughter was far down the list. He did not need any more confusion. For the past year she had been making him increasingly jittery whenever they were together. Worse, she did not even seem to be aware of it. No, he certainly did not want to add Egwene to his thoughts.

He was hoping his father had not noticed he was afraid when Tam said, "Remember the flame, lad, and the void."

It was an odd thing Tam had taught him. Concentrate on a single flame and feed all your passions into it — fear, hate, anger — until your mind became empty. Become one with the void, Tam said, and you could do anything. Nobody else in Emond's Field talked that way. But Tam won the archery competition at Bel Tine every year with his flame and his void. Rand thought he might have a chance at placing this year himself, if he could manage to hold onto the void. For Tam to bring it up now meant he had noticed, but he said nothing more about it.

Tam clucked Bela into motion once more, and they resumed their journey, the older man striding along as if nothing untoward had happened and nothing untoward could. Rand

wished he could imitate him. He tried forming the emptiness in his mind, but it kept slipping away into images of the black-cloaked horseman.

He wanted to believe that Tam was right, that the rider had just been his imagination, but he could remember that feeling of hatred too well. There had been someone. And that someone had meant him harm. He did not stop looking back until the high-peaked, thatched roofs of Emond's Field surrounded him.

The village lay close onto the Westwood, the forest gradually thinning until the last few trees stood actually among the stout frame houses. The land sloped gently down to the east. Though not without patches of woods, farms and hedge-bordered fields and pastures quilted the land beyond the village all the way to the Waterwood and its tangle of streams and ponds. The land to the west was just as fertile, and the pastures there lush in most years, but only a handful of farms could be found in the Westwood. Even those few dwindled to none miles short of the Sand Hills, not to mention the Mountains of Mist, which rose above the Westwood treetops, distant but in plain sight from Emond's Field. Some said the land was too rocky, as if there were not rocks everywhere in the Two Rivers, and others said it was hard-luck land. A few muttered that there was no point getting any closer to the mountains than needs be. Whatever the reasons, only the hardiest men farmed in the Westwood.

Small children and dogs dodged around the cart in whooping swarms once it passed the first row of houses. Bela plodded on patiently, ignoring the yelling youngsters who tumbled under her nose, playing tag and rolling hoops. In the last months there had been little of play or laughter from the children; even when the weather had slackened enough to let children out, fear of wolves kept them in. It seemed the approach of Bel Tine had taught them how to play again.

Festival had affected the adults as well. Broad shutters were thrown back, and in almost every house the goodwife stood in a window, apron tied about her and long-braided hair done up in a kerchief, shaking sheets or hanging mattresses over the windowsills. Whether or not leaves had appeared on the trees, no woman would let Bel Tine come before her spring cleaning was done. In every yard rugs hung from stretched lines, and children who had not been quick enough to run free in the streets instead vented their frustration on the carpets with wicker beaters. On roof after roof the goodman of the house clambered about, checking the thatch to see if the winter's damage meant calling on old Cenn Buie, the thatcher.

Several times Tam paused to engage one man or another in brief conversation. Since he and Rand had not been off the farm for weeks, everyone wanted to catch up on how things were out that way. Few Westwood men had been in. Tam spoke of damage from winter storms, each one worse than the one before, and stillborn lambs, of brown fields

where crops should be sprouting and pastures greening, of ravens flocking in where songbirds had come in years before. Grim talk, with preparations for Bel Tine going on all around them, and much shaking of heads. It was the same on all sides.

Most of the men rolled their shoulders and said, "Well, we'll survive, the Light willing." Some grinned and added, "And if the Light doesn't will, we'll still survive."

That was the way of most Two Rivers people. People who had to watch the hail beat their crops or the wolves take their lambs, and start over, no matter how many years it happened, did not give up easily. Most of those who did were long since gone.

Tam would not have stopped for Wit Congar if the man had not come out into the street so they had to halt or let Bela run over him. The Congars—and the Coplins; the two families were so intermarried no one really knew where one family let off and the other began — were known from Watch Hill to Deven Ride, and maybe as far as Taren Ferry, as complainers and troublemakers.

"I have to get this to Bran al'Vere, Wit," Tam said, nodding to the barrels in the cart, but the scrawny man held his ground with a sour expression on his face. He had been sprawled on his front steps, not up on his roof, though the thatch looked as if it badly needed Master Buie's attention. He never seemed ready to start over, or to finish what he started the first time. Most of the Coplins and Congars were like that, those who were not worse.

"What are we going to do about Nynaeve, al'Thor?" Congar demanded. "We can't have a Wisdom like that for Emond's Field."

Tam sighed heavily. "It's not our place, Wit. The Wisdom is women's business. "

"Well, we'd better do something, al'Thor. She said we'd have a mild winter. And a good harvest. Now you ask her what she hears on the wind, and she just scowls at you and stomps off."

"If you asked her the way you usually do, Wit," Tam said patiently, "you're lucky she didn't thump you with that stick she carries. Now if you don't mind, this brandy — "

"Nynaeve al'Meara is just too young to be Wisdom, al'Thor. If the Women's Circle won't do something, then the Village Council has to."

"What business of yours is the Wisdom, Wit Congar?" roared a woman's voice. Wit flinched as his wife marched out of the house. Daise Congar was twice as wide as Wit, a hard-faced woman without an ounce of fat on her. She glared at him with her fists on her hips. "You try meddling in Women's Circle business, and see how you like eating your own cooking. Which you won't do in my kitchen. And washing your own clothes and making your own bed. Which won't be under my roof."

"But, Daise," Wit whined, "I was just ..."

"If you'll pardon me, Daise," Tam said. "Wit. The Light shine on you both." He got Bela moving again, leading her around the scrawny fellow. Daise was concentrating on her husband now, but any minute she could realize whom it was Wit had been talking to.

That was why they had not accepted any of the invitations to stop for a bite to eat or something hot to drink. When they saw Tam, the goodwives of Emond's Field went on point like hounds spotting a rabbit. There was not a one of them who did not know just the perfect wife for a widower with a good farm, even if it was in the Westwood.

Rand stepped along just as quickly as Tam, perhaps even more so. He was sometimes cornered when Tam was not around, with no way to escape outside of rudeness. Herded onto a stool by the kitchen fire, he would be fed pastries or honeycakes or meatpies. And always the goodwife's eyes weighed and measured him as neatly as any merchant's scales and tapes while she told him that what he was eating was not nearly so good as her widowed sister's cooking, or her next-to-eldest cousin's. Tam was certainly not getting any younger, she would say. It was good that he had loved his wife so — it boded well for the next woman in his life — but he had mourned long enough. Tam needed a good woman. It was a simple fact, she would say, or something very close, that a man just could not do without a woman to take care of him and keep him out of trouble. Worst of all were those who paused thoughtfully at about that point, then asked with elaborate casualness exactly how old he was now.

Like most Two Rivers folk, Rand had a strong stubborn streak. Outsiders sometimes said it was the prime trait of people in the Two Rivers, that they could give mules lessons and teach stones. The goodwives were fine and kindly women for the most part, but he hated being pushed into anything, and they made him feel as if he were being prodded with sticks. So he walked fast, and wished Tam would hurry Bela along.

Soon the street opened onto the Green, a broad expanse in the middle of the village. Usually covered with thick grass, the Green this spring showed only a few fresh patches among the yellowish brown of dead grass and the black of bare earth. A double handful of geese waddled about, beadily eyeing the ground but not finding anything worth pecking, and someone had tethered a milkcow to crop the sparse growth.

Toward the west end of the Green, the Winespring itself gushed out of a low stone outcrop in a flow that never failed, a flow strong enough to knock a man down and sweet enough to justify its name a dozen times over. From the spring the rapidly widening Winespring Water ran swiftly off to the east, willows dotting its banks all the way to Master Thane's mill and beyond, until it split into dozens of streams in the swampy depths of the Waterwood. Two low, railed footbridges crossed the clear stream at the Green, and one bridge, wider than the others and stout enough to bear wagons. The Wagon Bridge marked where the North Road, coming down from Taren Ferry and

Watch Hill, became the Old Road, leading to Deven Ride. Outsiders sometimes found it funny that the road had one name to the north and another to the south, but that was the way it had always been, as far as anyone in Emond's Field knew, and that was that. It was a good enough reason for Two Rivers people.

On the far side of the bridges, the mounds were already building for the Bel Tine fires, three careful stacks of logs almost as big as houses. They had to be on cleared dirt, of course, not on the Green, even sparse as it was. What of Festival did not take place around the fires would happen on the Green.

Near the Winespring a score of older women sang softly as they erected the Spring Pole. Shorn of its branches, the straight, slender trunk of a fir tree stood ten feet high even in the hole they had dug for it. A knot of girls too young to wear their hair braided sat cross-legged and watched enviously, occasionally singing snatches of the song the women sang.

Tam clucked at Bela as if to make her speed her pace, though she ignored it, and Rand studiously kept his eyes from what the women were doing. In the morning the men would pretend to be surprised to find the Pole, then at noon the unmarried women would dance the Pole, entwining it with long, colored ribbons while the unmarried men sang. No one knew when the custom began or why— it was another thing that was the way it had always been — but it was an excuse to sing and dance, and nobody in the Two Rivers needed much excuse for that.

The whole day of Bel Tine would be taken up with singing and dancing and feasting, with time out for footraces, and contests in almost everything. Prizes would be given not only in archery, but for the best with the sling, and the quarterstaff. There would be contests at solving riddles and puzzles, at the rope tug, and lifting and tossing weights, prizes for the best singer, the best dancer and the best fiddle player, for the quickest to shear a sheep, even the best at bowls, and at darts.

Bel Tine was supposed to come when spring had well and truly arrived, the first lambs born and the first crop up. Even with the cold hanging on, though, no one had any idea of putting it off. Everyone could use a little singing and dancing. And to top everything, if the rumors could be believed, a grand display of fireworks was planned for the Green — if the first peddler of the year appeared in time, of course. That had been causing considerable talk; it was ten years since the last such display, and that was still talked about.

The Winespring Inn stood at the east end of the Green, hard beside the Wagon Bridge. The first floor of the inn was river rock, though the foundation was of older stone some said came from the mountains. The white-washed second story — where Brandelwyn al'Vere, the innkeeper and Mayor of Emond's Field for the past twenty years, lived in the

back with his wife and daughters—jutting out over the lower floor all the way around. Red roof tile, the only such roof in the village, glittered in the weak sunlight, and smoke drifted from three of the inn's dozen tall chimneys.

At the south end of the inn, away from the stream, stretched the remains of a much larger stone foundation, once part of the inn — or so it was said. A huge oak grew in the middle of it now, with a bole thirty paces around and spreading branches as thick as a man. In the summer, Bran al'Vere set tables and benches under those branches, shady with leaves then, where people could enjoy a cup and a cooling breeze while they talked or perhaps set out a board for a game of stones.

"Here we are, lad." Tam reached for Bela's harness, but she stopped in front of the inn before his hand touched leather. "Knows the way better than I do", he chuckled.

As the last creak of the axle faded, Bran al'Vere appeared from the inn, seeming as always to step too lightly for a man of his girth, nearly double that of anyone else in the village. A smile split his round face, which was topped by a sparse fringe of gray hair. The innkeeper was in his shirtsleeves despite the chill, with a spotless white apron wrapped around him. A silver medallion in the form of a set of balance scales hung on his chest.

The medallion, along with the full-size set of scales used to weigh the coins of the merchants who came down from Baerlon for wool or tabac, was the symbol of the Mayor's office. Bran only wore it for dealing with the merchants and for festivals, feastdays, and weddings. He had it on a day early now, but that night was Winternight, the night before Bel Tine, when everyone would visit back and forth almost the whole night long, exchanging small gifts, having a bite to eat and a touch to drink at every house. After the winter, Rand thought, he probably considers Winternight excuse enough not to wait until tomorrow.

"Tam," the Mayor shouted as he hurried toward them. "The Light shine on me, it's good to see you at last. And you, Rand. How are you, my boy?"

"Fine, Master al'Vere," Rand said. "And you, sir?" But Bran's attention was already back on Tam.

"I was almost beginning to think you wouldn't be bringing your brandy this year. You've never waited so late before."

"I've no liking for leaving the farm these days, Bran," Tam replied. "Not with the wolves the way they are. And the weather."

Bran harrumphed. "I could wish somebody wanted to talk about something besides the weather. Everyone complains about it, and folk who should know better expect me to set it right. I've just spent twenty minutes explaining to Mistress al'Donel that I can do nothing about the storks. Though what she expected me to do ... " He shook his head.

"An ill omen," a scratchy voice announced, "no storks nesting on the rooftops at Bel Tine." Cenn Buie, as gnarled and dark as an old root, marched up to Tam and Bran and leaned on his walking staff, near as tall as he was and just as gnarled. He tried to fix both men at once with a beady eye. "There's worse to come, you mark my words."

"Have you become a soothsayer, then, interpreting omens?" Tam asked dryly. "Or do you listen to the wind, like a Wisdom? There's certainly enough of it. Some originating not far from here."

"Mock if you will," Cenn muttered, "but if it doesn't warm enough for crops to sprout soon, more than one root cellar will come up empty before there's a harvest. By next winter there may be nothing left alive in the Two Rivers but wolves and ravens. If it is next winter at all. Maybe it will still be this winter."

"Now what is that supposed to mean?" Bran said sharply.

Cenn gave them a sour look. "I've not much good to say about Nynaeve al'Meara. You know that. For one thing, she's too young to — No matter. The Women's Circle seems to object to the Village Council even talking about their business, though they interfere in ours whenever they want to, which is most of the time, or so it seems to — "

"Cenn," Tam broke in, "is there a point to this?"

"This is the point, al'Thor. Ask the Wisdom when the winter will end, and she walks away. Maybe she doesn't want to tell us what she hears on the wind. Maybe what she hears is that the winter won't end. Maybe it's just going to go on being winter until the Wheel turns and the Age ends. There's your point."

"Maybe sheep will fly," Tam retorted, and Bran threw up his hands. "The Light protect me from fools. You sitting on the Village Council, Cenn, and now you're spreading that Coplin talk. Well, you listen to me. We have enough problems without ..."

A quick tug at Rand's sleeve and a voice pitched low, for his ear alone, distracted him from the older men's talk. "Come on, Rand, while they're arguing. Before they put you to work."

Rand glanced down, and had to grin. Mat Cauthon crouched beside the cart so Tam and Bran and Cenn could not see him, his wiry body contorted like a stork trying to bend itself double.

Mat's brown eyes twinkled with mischief, as usual. "Dav and I caught a big old badger, all grouchy at being pulled out of his den. We're going to let it loose on the Green and watch the girls run. "

Rand's smile broadened; it did not sound as much like fun to him as it would have a year or two back, but Mat never seemed to grow up. He took a quick look at his father — the men had their heads together still, all three talking at once — then lowered his own voice. "I promised to unload the cider. I can meet you later, though. "