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# A CROWN OF SWORDS

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*THE WHEEL  
OF TIME*



Robert  
Jordan

# **A Crown of Swords**

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There can be no health in us, nor any good thing grow, for the land is one with the Dragon Reborn, and he one with the land. Soul of fire, heart of stone, in pride he conquers, forcing the proud to yield. He calls upon the mountains to kneel, and the seas to give way, and the very skies to bow. Pray that the heart of stone remembers tears, and the soul of fire, love.

— From a muchdisputed translation of?The Prophecies of the Dragon by the poet?Kyera Termendal of Shiota, believed to have?been published between FY 700 and FY 800

## PROLOGUE

(Serpent and Wheel)

### Lightnings

From the tall arched window, close onto eighty spans above the ground, not far below the top of the White Tower, Elaida could see for miles beyond Tar Valon, to the rolling plains and forests that bordered the broad River Erinin, running down from north and west before it divided around the white walls of the great island city. On the ground, long morning shadows must have been dappling the city, but from this prominence all seemed clear and bright. Not even the fabled “topless towers” of Cairhien had truly rivaled the White Tower. Certainly none of Tar Valon’s lesser towers did, for all that men spoke far and wide of them and their vaulting skybridges.

This high, an almost constant breeze lessened the unnatural heat gripping the world. The Feast of Lights past, snow should have covered the ground deep, yet the weather belonged in the depths of a hard summer. Another sign that the Last Battle approached and the Dark One touched the world, if more were needed. Elaida did not let the heat touch her even when she descended, of course. The breeze was not why she had had her quarters moved up here, despite the inconvenience of so many stairs, to these simple rooms.

Plain russet floor tiles and white marble walls decorated by a few tapestries could not compare with the grandeur of the Amyrlin’s study and the rooms that went with it far below. She still used those rooms occasionally — they held associations with the power of the Amyrlin Seat in some minds — but she resided here, and worked here more often than not. For the view.

Not of city or river or forests, though. Of what was beginning in the Tower grounds.

Great diggings and foundations spread across what had been the Warders' practice yard, tall wooden cranes and stacks of cut marble and granite. Masons and laborers swarmed over the workings like ants, and endless streams of wagons trailed through the gates onto the Tower grounds, bringing more stone. To one side stood a wooden "working model," as the masons called it, big enough for men to enter crouching on their heels and see every detail, where every stone should go. Most of the workmen could not read, after all — neither words nor mason's drawn plans. The "working model" was as large as some manor houses.

When any king or queen had a palace, why should the Amyrlin Seat be relegated to apartments little better than those of many ordinary sisters? Her palace would match the White Tower for splendor, and have a great spire ten spans higher than the Tower itself. The blood had drained from the chief mason's face when he heard that. The Tower had been Ogierbuilt, with assistance from sisters using the Power. One look at Elaida's face, however, set Master Lerman bowing and stammering that of course all would be done as she wished. As if there had been any question.

Her mouth tightened with exasperation. She had wanted Ogier masons again, but the Ogier were confining themselves to their steddung for some reason. Her summons to the nearest, Steddung Jentaine, in the Black Hills, had been met with refusal. Polite, yet still refusal, without explanation, even to the Amyrlin Seat. Ogier were reclusive at best. Or they might be withdrawing from a world full of turmoil; Ogier stayed clear of human strife.

Firmly Elaida dismissed the Ogier from her mind. She prided herself on separating what could be from what could not. Ogier were a triviality. They had no part in the world beyond the cities they had built so long ago and seldom visited now except to make repairs.

The men below, crawling beetlelike over the building site, made her frown slightly. Construction went forward by inches. Ogier might be out of the question, yet perhaps the One Power could be used again. Few sisters possessed real strength in weaving Earth, but not that much was required to reinforce stone, or bind stone to stone. Yes. In her mind, the palace stood finished, colonnaded walks and great domes shining with gilt and that one spire reaching to the heavens... Her eyes rose to the cloudless sky, to where the spire would peak, and she let out a long sigh. Yes. The orders would be

issued today.

The towering case clock in the room behind her chimed Third Rise, and in the city gongs and bells pealed the hour, the sound faint here, so high above. With a smile, Elaida left the window, smoothing her redslashed dress of cream silk and adjusting the broad, striped stole of the Amyrlin Seat on her shoulders.

On the ornately gilded clock, small figures of gold and silver and enamel moved with the chimes. Horned and snouted Trollocs fled from a cloaked Aes Sedai on one level; on another a man representing a false Dragon tried to fend off silver lightning bolts that had obviously been hurled by a second sister. And above the clockface, itself above her head, a crowned king and queen knelt before an Amyrlin Seat in her enameled stole, with the Flame of Tar Valon, carved from a large moonstone, atop a golden arch over her head.

She did not laugh often, but she could not help a quietly pleased chuckle at the clock. Cemaile Sorenthaine, raised from the Gray, had commissioned it dreaming of a return to the days before the Trolloc Wars, when no ruler held a throne without the Tower's approval. Cemaile's grand plans came to naught, however, as did Cemaile, and for three centuries the clock sat in a dusty storage room, an embarrassment no one dared display. Until Elaida. The Wheel of Time turned. What was once, could be again. Would be again.

The case clock balanced the door to her sitting room, and her bedchamber and dressing room beyond. Fine tapestries, colorful work from Tear and Kandor and Arad Doman, with threadofgold and threadofsilver glittering among the merely dyed, hung each exactly opposite its mate. She had always liked order. The carpet covering most of the tiles came from Tarabon, patterned in red and green and gold; silk carpets were the most precious. In each corner of the room a marble plinth carved in unpretentious verticals held a white vase of fragile Sea Folk porcelain with two dozen carefully arranged red roses. To make roses bloom now required the One Power, especially with the drought and heat; a worthwhile use, in her opinion. Gilded carving covered both the only chair — no one sat in her presence now — and the writing table, but in the stark style of Cairhien. A simple room, really, with a ceiling barely two spans high, yet it would do until her palace was ready. With the view, it would.

The tall chairback held the Flame of Tar Valon picked out in moonstones above her dark head as she sat. Nothing marred the polished surface of the table except for three boxes of Altaran lacquerwork, arranged just so.

Opening the box covered with golden hawks among white clouds, she removed a slim strip of thin paper from atop the pile of reports and correspondence inside.

For what must have been the hundredth time, she read the message come from Cairhien by pigeon twelve days ago. Few in the Tower knew of its existence. None but she knew its contents, or would have a glimmer of what it meant if they did. The thought almost made her laugh again.

The ring has been placed in the bull's nose. I expect a pleasant journey to market.

No signature, yet she needed none. Only Galina Casban had known to send that glorious message. Galina, whom Elaida trusted to do what she would have trusted to no one else save herself; Not that she trusted anyone fully, but the head of the Red Ajah more than any other. She herself had been raised from the Red, after all, and in many ways still thought of herself as Red.

The ring has been placed in the bull's nose.

Rand al'Thor — the Dragon Reborn, the man who had seemed on the point of swallowing the world, the man who had swallowed entirely too much of it — Rand al'Thor was shielded and in Galina's control. And none who might support him knew. Even a chance of that, and the wording would have been different. By various earlier messages, it seemed he had rediscovered how to Travel, a Talent lost to Aes Sedai since the Breaking, yet that had not saved him. It had even played into Galina's hands. Apparently he had a habit of coming and going without warning. Who would suspect that this time he had not gone, but been taken? Something very like a giggle rose in her.

Inside another week, two at most, al'Thor would be in the Tower, closely supervised and guided safely until Tarmon Gai'don, his ravaging of the world stopped. It was madness to allow any man who could channel to run free, but most of all the man prophecy said must face the Dark One in the Last Battle, the Light send that it lay years off yet in spite of the weather. Years would be needed to arrange the world properly, beginning with undoing what al'Thor had done.

Of course, the damage he had wrought was nothing beside what he could have caused, free. Not to mention the possibility that he might have gotten himself killed before he was needed. Well, that troublesome young man would be wrapped in swaddling and kept safe as an infant in his mother's

arms until time to take him to Shayol Ghul. After that, if he survived...

Elaida's lips pursed. The Prophecies of the Dragon seemed to say he would not, which undeniably would be for the best.

"Mother?" Elaida almost gave a start as Alviarin spoke. Entering without so much as a knock! "I have word from the Ajahs, Mother." Slim and coolfaced, Alviarin wore the Keeper's narrow stole in white, matching her dress, to show she had been raised from the White, but in her mouth 'Mother' became less a title of respect and more an address to an equal.

Alviarin's presence was enough to dent Elaida's good mood. That the Keeper of Chronicles came from the White, not the Red, always served as a biting reminder of her weakness when she was first raised. Some of that had been dispelled, true, but not all. Not yet. She was tired of regretting that she had so few personal eyesandears outside Andor. And that her predecessor and Alviarin's had escaped — been helped to escape; they must have had help! — escaped before the keys to the Amyrlin's great network could be wrested out of them.

She more than wanted the network that was hers by right. By strong tradition the Ajahs sent to the Keeper whatever dribbles from their own eyesandears they were willing to share with the Amyrlin, but Elaida was convinced the woman kept back some of even that trickle. Yet she could not ask the Ajahs for information directly. Bad enough to be weak without going begging to the world. The Tower, anyway, which was as much of the world as really counted.

Elaida kept her own face every bit as cool as the other woman's, acknowledging her only with a nod while she pretended to examine papers from the lacquered box. Slowly she turned them over one by one, returned them to the box slowly. Without really seeing a word. Making Alviarin wait was bitter, because it was petty, and petty ways were all she had to strike at one who should have been her servant.

An Amyrlin could issue any decree she wished, her word law and absolute. Yet as a practical matter, without support from the Hall of the Tower, many of those decrees were wasted ink and paper. No sister would disobey an Amyrlin, not directly at least, yet many decrees required a hundred other things ordered to implement them. In the best of times that could come slowly, on occasion so slowly it never happened, and these were far from the best.

Alviarin stood there, calm as a frozen pond. Closing the Altaran box,

Elaida kept out the strip of paper that announced her sure victory. Unconsciously she fingered it, a talisman. “Has Teslyn or Joline finally deigned to send more than word of their safe arrival?”

That was meant to remind Alviarin that no one could consider herself immune. Nobody cared what happened in Ebou Dar, Elaida least of all; the capital of Altara could fall into the sea, and except for the merchants, not even the rest of Altara would notice. But Teslyn had sat in the Hall nearly fifteen years before Elaida had commanded her to resign her chair. If Elaida could send a Sitter — a Red Sitter — who had supported her rise off as ambassador to a flyspeck throne with no one sure why but a hundred rumors flowering, then she could come down on anyone. Joline was a different matter. She had held her chair for the Green only a matter of weeks, and everyone was sure the Greens had selected her to show they would not be cowed by the new Amyrlin, who had handed her a fearsome penance. That bit of insolence could not be allowed to pass, of course, and had not been. Everyone knew that, too.

It was meant to remind Alviarin that she was vulnerable, but the slim woman merely smiled her cool smile. So long as the Hall remained as it was, she was immune. She riffled through the papers in her hand, plucking one out. “No word from Teslyn or Joline, Mother, no, though with the news you have received so far from the thrones...” That smile deepened into something dangerously close to amusement. “They all mean to try their wings, to see if you are as strong as... as your predecessor.” Even Alviarin had enough sense not to speak the Sanche woman’s name in her presence. It was true, though; every king and queen, even mere nobles, seemed to be testing the limits of her power. She must make examples.

Glancing at the paper, Alviarin went on. “There is word from Ebou Dar, however. Through the Gray.” Had she emphasized that, to drive the splinter deeper? “It appears Elayne Trakand and Nynaeve al’Meara are there. Posing as full sisters, with the blessings of the rebel... embassy... to Queen Tylin. There are two others, not identified, who may be doing the same. The lists of who is with the rebels are incomplete. Or they may just be companions. The Grays are uncertain.”

“Why under the Light would they be in Ebou Dar?” Elaida said dismissively. Certainly Teslyn would have sent news of that. “The Gray must be passing along rumors, now. Tarna’s message said they are with the rebels in Salidar.” Tarna Feir had reported Siuan Sanche there, too. And Logain

Ablar, spreading those vicious lies no Red sister could lower herself to acknowledge, much less deny. The Sanche woman had a hand in that obscenity, or the sun would rise in the west tomorrow. Why could she not simply have crawled away and died, decently out of sight, like other stilled women?

It required effort not to draw a deep breath. Logain could be hanged quietly as soon as the rebels were dealt with; most of the world thought him dead long since. The filthy slander that the Red Ajah had set him up as a false Dragon would die with him. When the rebels were dealt with, the Sanche woman could be made to hand over the keys to the Amyrlin's eyesandears. And name the traitors who had helped her escape, A foolish hope to wish that Alviarin would be named among them. "I can hardly see the al'Meara girl running to Ebou Dar claiming to be Aes Sedai, much less Elayne, can you?"

"You did order Elayne found, Mother. As important as putting a leash on al'Thor, you said. When she was among three hundred rebels in Salidar, it was impossible to do anything, but she will not be so well protected in the Tarasin Palace."

"I have no time for gossip and rumors." Elaida bit off each word with contempt. Did Alviarin know more than she should, mentioning al'Thor, and leashing? "I suggest you read Tarna's report again, then ask yourself whether even rebels would allow Accepted to pretend to the shawl."

Alviarin waited with visible patience for her to finish, then examined her sheaf again and pulled out four more sheets. "The Gray agent sent sketches," she said blandly, proffering the pages. "He is no artist, but Elayne and Nynaeve are recognizable." After a moment, when Elaida did not take the drawings, she slipped them under the rest.

Elaida felt the color of anger and embarrassment rising in her cheeks. Alviarin had led her down this path deliberately by not bringing out those sketches at the first. She ignored that — anything else would only be more embarrassing still — but her voice became cold. "I want them taken, and brought to me."

The lack of curiosity on Alviarin's face made Elaida wonder again how much the woman knew that she was not supposed to. The al'Meara girl might well provide a handle on al'Thor, coming from the same village. All the sisters knew that, just as they knew that Elayne was DaughterHeir of Andor, and that her mother was dead. Vague rumors linking Morgase to the Whitecloaks were so much nonsense, for she would never have gone to the

Children of the Light for help. She was dead, leaving not even a corpse behind, and Elayne would be Queen. If she could be wrested away from the rebels before the Andoran Houses put Dyelin on the Lion Throne instead. It was not widely known what made Elayne more important than any other noble with a strong claim to a throne. Aside from the fact that she would be Aes Sedai one day, of course.

Elaida had the Foretelling sometimes, a Talent many thought lost before her, and long ago she had Foretold that the Royal House of Andor held the key to winning the Last Battle. Twentyfive years gone and more, as soon as it became clear that Morgase Trakand would gain the throne in the Succession, Elaida had fastened herself to the girl, as she was then. How Elayne was crucial, Elaida did not know, but Foretelling never lied. Sometimes she almost hated the Talent. She hated things she could not control.

“I want all four of them, Alviarin.” The other two were unimportant, certainly, but she would take no chances. “Send my command to Teslyn immediately. Tell her — and Joline — that if they fail to send regular reports from now on, they will wish they had never been born. Include the information from the Macura woman.” Her mouth twisted around that last.

The name made Alviarin shift uneasily, too, and no wonder. Ronde Macura’s nasty little infusion was something to make any sister uncomfortable. Forkroot was not lethal — at least you woke, if you drank enough to sleep — but a tea that deadened a woman’s ability to channel seemed aimed too directly at Aes Sedai. A pity the information had not been received before Galina went; if forkroot worked on men as well as it seemed to on women, it would have made her task considerably easier.

Alviarin’s ill ease lasted only a moment; a mere instant and she was all selfpossession again, unyielding as a wall of ice. “As you wish, Mother. I am sure they will leap to obey, as of course they should.”

A sudden flash of irritation swept Elaida like fire in dry pasture. The fate of the world in her hands, and petty stumbling blocks kept rising beneath her feet. Bad enough that she had rebels and recalcitrant rulers to handle, but too many Sitters still brooded and grumbled behind her back, fertile ground for the other woman to plow. Only six were firmly under her own thumb, and she suspected as many at least listened closely to Alviarin before they voted. Certainly nothing of importance passed through the Hall unless Alviarin agreed to it. Not open agreement, not with any acknowledgment that Alviarin bore a shred more influence or power than a Keeper should, but if Alviarin