

98,198 Words

Arica's Tale

A story Set in the World of Robert Jordan's Wheel of Time

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SECOND DRAFT

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Dedication

To my wife, Angie, for putting up with me while writing it and for helping me know how a woman would view things.

PROLOGUE

The Time Before

I – SISTERS

The village was small but elegant, as only could befit those who lived here in Arad Doman. On most occasions it was quiet as well, with very little of interest ever occurring there. Its name was long since lost, but many of the elders referred to it as the place where dreams came to die.

The only thing about the village that gave it any attention whatsoever was its reputation. Many persons of noble birth have known that here was the place to find the best harlots in the world. The reputation was not the best, to be sure, but it had stood as such since before the breaking of the world, if the speculation and gossip of the elders was to be believed.

The young girl walking down the street with a mischievous smile on her face could care less about the reputation her home village had acquired through the Ages gone. At the moment her mind was on adventure and excitement, or at least what could pass for the two here. She waved at a passing playmate as she opened the door to the building she had come upon and mounted the stairs.

I hope Ari is here, she thought, bracing herself in case it was her best friend's mother that answered instead of Arica.

Moria had been friends with Arica for as long as she could remember. Her mother had sat for Arica many times while they were growing up, and the two girls had become friends of the type only possible when they grow up together. They even seemed to forget they were not the sisters they acted and even looked like most of the time.

Nervously holding her breath, Moria reached up to tap softly on her friend's door. Arica's mother cared little for her daughter, and even less for her young friend. Moria could still vividly remember the woman chasing her and Arica out of the house with a broom handle just for giggling a little too loud while she had one of her "visitors" sharing her bed. Moria had escaped with nothing more than a mild scrape down her back; Arica had required a visit to Mother Luenne for a split scalp and a huge bruise on her cheek. Arica had shrugged it off by saying she was thankful her jaw had not been broken by the blow; Moria decided Arica's mother was as mad as a fool.

She let out the breath she had been holding when the door opened to reveal Arica standing there. The girl was two years older than Moria, but other than age and maybe three inches in height, the differences between them were few. Both had light golden hair and pale blue eyes that seemed as though they were made of fine crystal. Arica maybe weighed a stone more than her younger friend, but they were both slim and obviously crossing over into womanhood.

The smile returned to Moria's face as her friend regarded her with mild amusement.

"Let me guess," Arica said. "You have an idea for a scheme in mind, don't you?"

Moria tried to look abashed, but failed miserably. "Why would you think that?"

Arica snorted and stepped out into the hallway with her, closing the door gently behind her.

"Because," she replied evenly. "Every time you show up at my door with that bloody smile on your face, I get into trouble."

The younger girl huffed indignantly. "That is not true!"

Arica shook her head and gave Moria a wistful smile. "If you say so, Mori."

"There's no scheme, Ari. I'm just bored and wanted some company."

The look Arica gave her showed how little she believed that. After a moment of silence between them, Arica sighed and shook her head.

“Very well,” she muttered. “But only for a little while. If I don’t finish stitching mother’s dresses today, she’ll have my hide.”

The smile split Moria’s face with renewed vigor as she grabbed her friend’s hand and pulled her down the hall towards the stairs.

II – MISCHIEF MAKING

Arica rolled her eyes at her friend as they left the seamstress’s small shop in the middle of the village. The old woman had seemed scandalized when Moria asked her to make a dress for her that looked like the one she was currently working on. The question had even startled her once she realized how much would be missing from the half-finished gown. Girls as young as Moria were forbidden to wear such revealing clothing. Once she caught the gleam in her young friend’s eye that told her Moria was merely trying to shock the old seamstress, she had paid for her thread quickly and hurried her out of the shop before the woman could send for their mothers.

“You *must* be trying to get me into trouble,” she grumbled at Moria once they were down the street a ways. “And wipe that silly grin off your face. You’ll be lucky if your mother isn’t waiting for you with a strap when you get home.”

Moria merely giggled harder and put a hand to her mouth. “But the look on her face.... Oh, Ari, I wish an artist were there to sketch it so I could have it forever.”

The older girl sighed deeply and shook her head. "I ought to switch your bottom myself," she snapped half-heartedly.

"How much do you think we could get for...?"

"Enough!" Arica cried. "You are not old enough to even consider thinking about such things!"

"Now *you* sound like Mother," Moria muttered. She turned and began walking towards one of the village's five inns, a new look of mischief spreading across her features.

Arica continued on another six steps before she discovered that her friend was heading in another direction. Mumbling to herself about the girl's foolish actions, she quickly caught up to her.

"Now what are you planning?"

The younger girl looked up at her with false innocence. "Just to get some punch from Mistress Luene."

Arica's eyes narrowed at that, bringing an indignant huff from Moria. "Well, that *is* what I plan to do."

"What else?"

"Light, Ari!" the girl swore loudly, causing a passing man to jump at the curse.

"Not every bloody thing I do has some nasty plot behind it!"

"Watch your language," Arica said, looking around. "Otherwise you may get strapped yet."

It was Moria's turn to roll her eyes as she opened the heavy oak door to the inn. She stepped through without another word, Arica following with another sigh.

The small common room was nearly deserted at this time of day, only one other woman sitting in a corner sipping a cup of tea and daydreaming contentedly. The rest of the room's few tables sat as deserted as the platform at the end of the room where the occasional girl sang or the few gleemen that passed through put on their performances. A sparse fire blazed in the hearth and only one of the inn's three serving girls appeared to be on duty. Arica followed her friend over to the woman who stood wiping out pewter mugs for the ale that would surely flow later that evening.

"Hi, Elaira," Moria said with a smile as she approached the serving girl.

“Good day Moria, Arica,” the girl replied, not bothering to look away from her work. Arica couldn’t help wondering again if Elaira took part in “entertaining” the nobles that stayed in the inn on their trips through to Bandar Eban or Marabon. She was certainly pretty enough to receive more than her fair share of appraising looks, with her flowing dark hair and slender frame. With only a small bit of work, the girl would be downright beautiful instead of simply pretty.

Moria was looking around impatiently once she decided that Elaira was not going to offer to serve her anything. Arica understood that the innkeeper’s wife, Mistress Luene, would probably give Elaira the rough side of her tongue if those drinking mugs were not cleaned well. It was not at all uncommon for Arica to serve herself when it was this early in the day, and Mistress Luene usually said nothing about it. She smiled warmly as she walked past the girl doing her job and started pulling out two cups and looking for the pitcher of punch that usually sat behind the small counter, but Moria was undaunted in her searching.

“Where is Mistress Luene?” the young girl finally asked.

Elaira placed the mug she had just finished with on a long shelf and reached behind her to grab another one from a small table that held several. “She is in her bath at the moment,” she answered without looking at Moria.

Arica had found the pitcher and was pouring a cup for Moria when she saw the look that came into the other girl's eyes. She frowned as she watched her friend begin to smile wickedly.

"Moria," she began, the warning tone evident in her voice.

The girl waved a hand irritably in her direction and wandered off towards the bathing chambers.

"Blood and bloody ashes!" Arica muttered. With a quick glance at Elaira, she poured a cup of the plum brandy that was under the counter and drank it down quickly, trying unsuccessfully to hide the grimace as it went down. She refilled her cup with some of the punch and carried both hers and Moria's to a nearby table.

"She's in one of her moods, is she?" Elaira asked as she passed. Obviously the girl *had* noticed the brandy.

Arica grunted and shook her head. "When isn't she?"

Elaira looked at her long enough to flash a sympathetic grin. "I doubt I could answer that honestly."

Arica returned the grin and moved on to her table. She had barely gotten the cup to her lips for her first sip when she heard Mistress Luene roar from the bathing chambers loud enough for Elaira to drop the mug she was cleaning.

“There now! Who is that? What in the Light are you doing with those? Come back here, burn you!”

Moria came tearing out of the hall that led to the women’s baths with a bundle of rags in her arms. Arica started to ask why Mistress Luene would get so upset about a bundle of rags when the reality of the situation dawned on her. It took an effort to close her jaw. She was moving even before she realized she had stood, chasing after her friend.

Light tell me she didn’t!

She reached the door a split second behind Moria. A crash behind her caused her to nearly jump out of her skin. She turned and went out the door backwards when she saw Elaira sprawled on the floor where she had been bowled over by Mistress Luene.

The innkeeper’s wife stood there naked as the day she was born, bathwater dripping from her ample body. The woman was built like the local blacksmith, and the look in her eyes showed that she would likely use whoever had just stolen her clothes as an anvil. The woman raised a finger as wide as two of Arica’s own and pointed at her.

“Here, girl! Bring those clothes here, now, before I strip the hide off your bloody arse!”

Arica did the only thing she could think of at the moment: she ran after Moria. *Surely the old woman wouldn't...*

Another crash behind her drove a spike of ice through her stomach. That was the inn's door being slammed open. *Then again, maybe she would.*

She ducked past startled passersby, trying desperately to catch up with her friend. Moria seemed to have vanished into thin air once she got out onto the street. Arica craned her neck to see over the tops of people's heads, but she saw no sign of Moria anywhere.

A hand reached out and pulled her into a nearby alleyway, nearly causing her to fall flat on her face as her balance slipped. Arica looked over to see Moria, tears streaming from her face from laughter, still clutching the clothes she had stolen from Mistress Luene.

“Moria, what in the Light are you trying to do?” Arica cried, reaching for the clothes. “Give me those!”

The younger girl seemed to be struggling to find her voice. She was nearly doubled over now, and laughing even harder than before. Arica just stared at her, disbelief covering her face.

“There you are!”

Both girls jumped at the bellow behind them. Arica’s face froze as she slowly turned to face Mistress Luene. The big woman was no longer dripping, but she still stood there without a stitch, hands balled up and resting on her hips as she stared at the two girls in the alley.

“Thought you’d have a good chuckle over stealing my clothes, did you?”

Arica swallowed and started to open her mouth when Mistress Luene cut her off before she could even get a word out.

“Which one of you came up with this Light-forsaken idea? Speak up, now! Don’t make things worse for yourselves.”

With a quick warning glance at Moria, Arica almost whispered her response.

“It was me, Mistress. I took them.”

Moria started to say something but bit her lip at another firm glance from Arica. Mistress Luene looked from one girl to the other and back again, the stormclouds behind her eyes not fading in the least. Finally she nodded once and centered her gaze on Arica.

“Why?”

Arica blinked. *This can't be this easy.* She took a deep breath before answering.

“I was trying to show Moria how she needs to be careful all the time, because you never know what can happen when you least expect it.”

The lie burned her tongue, but it was the best she could come up with at the moment. It sounded good to her, anyway. Mistress Luene seemed less impressed by it.

“Have you ever noticed what is left behind horses as they walk through a street?”

Confusion filled Arica's face; there was no way she could hide it. “Yes,” she answered slowly.

“That tale bears a striking resemblance to it.”

Arica winced.

“My guess,” Mistress Luene went on, “is that you were looking to have some laughs at someone’s expense, and I happened to be available at the moment. Not a terrible crime, but you are old enough to know better.”

“Yes, Mistress.”

“I know your mother well, Arica, and I know exactly what she will do to you were she to find out about this.”

Fear began to creep up Arica’s spine. She had a pretty good idea what she would do as well. The older woman apparently saw the fear in her eyes, and her tone softened slightly.

“And that is why I will not tell her.”

Arica’s fear was replaced by unmitigated relief. She could have hugged the woman, had her posture not been the same as it had begun and had she not been naked.

“I have no desire to see you walking around with a split head, girl, but you still need to be punished for this.”

Mistress Luene turned and grabbed a startled and highly embarrassed man who was walking past. With no ceremony at all, the woman ripped the belt out of his breeches

and told him to move on before she moved him. Whether it was the thinly veiled threat in her voice or her unclothed girth, the man wasted no time scurrying away down the street. Mistress Luene snorted and turned back to the girls, the belt hanging loose in her hand.

“I think one stripe for each piece of clothing should be sufficient.”

Arica’s lips tightened, but she turned and bent to hold her ankles.

Once she had finished punishing her, Mistress Luene took back her clothes and put them back on right there in the middle of the alleyway. Arica would never have believed that the woman would have worn so many frills in her normal garb. She had even counted each stocking as an individual article of clothing along with her shift, skirts, blouse, coat, belt, and apron. *Light, she even counted each shoe!*

After the woman left to return the man’s belt, Moria cautiously approached her friend and looked up into her face.

“Oh, Arica,” the younger girl said softly. “Thank you. You didn’t have to do that you know.”

Arica managed a smile as she rubbed her backside. She had no doubts it would be at least dusk before she would be able to sit again without pain from the strapping.

“I know,” she replied. “But there was no sense in both of us getting strapped for that.”

Moria’s face grew serious, or at least as serious as she could manage.

“You’re the best friend I ever had, Ari. I sometimes wish we really were sisters.”

Arica couldn’t help herself. She reached out and drew Moria into a loving – almost sisterly – embrace. She released her after a moment with a firm swat on the rear before starting for home.

“Don’t you forget it, either,” she said, her amused voice falsifying the stern look on her face. “And try not to get me into any worse trouble next time.”

Moria laughed and grabbed her friend’s hand, walking away with her holding it tenderly.

The old woman stretched as she rose from her small writing table. She frowned as she looked around the small sitting room of her sparse cabin in the wilderness. She was still having a hard time adjusting to these new surroundings, having discovered that the things that existed in this Age were nothing at all like what she remembered.

She wasn't even sure how she got here, truth be told. One moment she had been asleep and the next her eyes were opening in the wilderness of Amador, not far from the city of Baerlon. She was who she was, that had not changed, but the things these people seemed to consider luxuries! She was used to so much more, and was having a hard time dealing with the primitive constructs that were available to her.

A glance at the tallow candle sitting beside her papers and pen proved her point. She was used to glow lamps hanging on the walls, or even sitting on the table; this might as well be still in the wilderness for the good this little light did her.

If anyone had been looking through her windows, they would have been confused at the old, frail woman striding confidently to the hearth for hot water to make her tea with. The cane resting beside the door would not have helped the confusion. The old woman would have been startled as well, had she not been the one to create this illusion. She wasn't sure whether or not her true image was well known in this Age or not, but it was best to not take any chances until she had a better idea of what the Great Lord had awakened her for.

She sipped the tea as she considered the matter. If she was awake again, it stood to reason that the others would be awakening soon, if they hadn't already. Soon she would have to try and make contact, if for no other reason than they all distrusted each other more than they trusted themselves. If they were all awake, though, it meant something else as well....

Tarmon gai'din was coming. The Dragon must be reborn, whether the man was aware of it yet or not. Lews Therin was among the living once more. There would be much to do in preparation of this. She had to find the others.

With a sigh, she returned to her notes and traded her cup for her pen. *Much* to do. But perhaps something would come along to entertain her for a bit. It had been an Age since she was entertained.

PART ONE

The Fall of Lord Draven

I – A NEW ARRIVAL

The Wheel of Time turns, and Ages come and pass, leaving memories that become legends. Legends fade 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 passed, a wind rose in a small village in Northeastern Arad Doman. The wind was not the beginning. There are neither beginnings or endings to the turning of the Wheel of Time. But it was *a* beginning.

Through the bustling village streets it blew, barely raising dust on the well-packed dirt. An old man felt the wind and pulled his cloak tighter around his shoulders. The wind was not cold, but like many others his age, the old man had thin blood and needed the extra barrier between his skin and the wind that passed. So involved with the action of pulling the cloak tighter was the man that he never noticed the young blond girl coming up behind him quickly until she had passed him by.

The old man nearly fell as he dodged the young girl racing through the streets of the village that morning. He swore at her rapidly departing back and shook his fist in impotent anger, knowing full well that Moria was off on some new damn fool idea of hers. He shuffled away, wondering what one of the visiting Nobles might think if it had been them she nearly bowled over.

It was word of a Noble's impending arrival that had sparked her interest this morning – a proven fact, to her words, though the origins of this so-called “fact” were not or could not have been named. She raced through the streets, almost knocking over another stately old Domani, anxious to get to the small home at the southernmost edge of the village.

With a bright smile she burst through the door and raced to the upstairs room where she spied her best friend busily crafting a new dress.

“Have you heard? Have you heard the news?” she cried excitedly.

Arica looked up from her sewing with a look that showed perfectly well that she had not, in fact, heard any news, and was quite used to these types of outbursts from her friend.

“No, Moria,” she responded with a small smile. “Do tell. What grand news have you conjured this time?”

Moria scowled slightly at the barb, but quickly regained her entranced demeanor. She regarded her friend with another broad grin.

“Lord Draven! He’s coming back in two days!” Her eyes twinkled dreamily. “He promised to tell me of his adventures, and bring me a present when he returns.”

Arica eyed her skeptically. “Why is he bringing you a present?”

Moria’s eyes flashed. “Why, because he’s my friend, that’s why he’s bring me a gift!”

Arica sighed and shook her head. “Not bloody likely. Most likely he thinks of it as payment in an attempt to be the first one into your knickers.”

At that, the smile disappeared completely from Moria’s face. Arica could almost swear she saw tears beginning to well up in her friend’s eyes.

“You’re just bloody jealous is all!” Moria exclaimed, barely keeping her voice from cracking.

Arica sighed again and closed her eyes. *No, now wouldn’t be the time to tell you the truth*, she thought wearily. She just couldn’t bring herself to tell her friend that the last time Lord Draven had passed through the village she had spent the night in his bed. Being two years older than Moria, and looking remarkably similar to what it was assumed Moria would look like when she, too turned fourteen, the two were often mistaken for sisters. As was the case with Lord Draven. He had a thing for Moria, there

was no sense denying it. But it had nothing at all to do with friendship. He just wanted to be her first. He had admitted as much to Arica the night they spent together, just before he told her he was going to imagine that she was her younger “sister”, not realizing they were not related.

Arica shook the memories away with another sigh. She looked up to find a triumphant yet expectant look on Moria’s face. *I guess she’s waiting for a response to that last comment.*

“No, Moria. It’s not jealousy,” she began slowly. “It’s just...”

“Just what, Arica? You want him for yourself, is that it?”

Arica snorted. “Hardly. You can have him for all of me, but...”

“But what?”

Why do I suddenly have the feeling sighing is going to be common in this conversation? Arica thought, then did it again. “Look, you’re my best friend. I know you really like Lord Draven, and I know you feel like he’s your friend. Maybe he even thinks it. But all of the Nobility that passes through here wants only one thing. Why do you think our village is known for what it is?”

“He’s not like that!” Moria cried indignantly, not bothering to hide the tears now. “He’s different from all the other fools that come here in search of a quick lay or a good time! He really does care about me! Why can’t you accept that? Is it because no one cares about you unless they have a hand up your skirt fronts and the other on your arse?!”

Arica winced. *Ouch*. “Moria, you’re angry with me, so I won’t take that personal – *this time*.” She shot her friend a hard look. “But you have to understand something. I worry about you, Moria. My brother died in the wars years ago, and you’re the closest thing I’ve got to a sister. So I care about you, and I care about what happens to you. Maybe I am wrong about Lord Draven. Maybe he really does want to be your friend. Next year, you’ll be old enough to do whatever you want to with him, and he knows that, too. If he returns after that time comes and nothing changes between the two of you, then I’ll be the first to wish you the best. But if it *does* change, I want you to be prepared so you don’t get hurt. I just want you to consider the possibility that he just wants what you have between your legs rather than what’s in your head and heart.”

Moria sat down across from Arica slowly with her head down. She remained that way long enough for Arica to begin to think that for some gods unknown reason she had fallen asleep. Finally she looked Arica in the eyes with her own red-rimmed ones.

“I know you’re right, Arica. I just don’t want to believe he’s as bad as the rest. I can’t believe it!” she said at last, breaking off with a sob that caused Arica to believe her

heart was ripping into pieces. Moria looked up again, fresh tears streaming freely down her face. “I just want to believe he really is my friend.”

Arica nodded slowly. She remembered herself in this same situation not that long ago. She didn’t have someone to help her out though. “I know, Moria. Believe me, I do. And like I said, maybe he is different. I just want you to be prepared if he isn’t.”

Moria smiled tightly, tears still standing in her eyes. “Thanks, Arica. Sometimes I wish you were my sister.” She crossed the room quickly and caught Arica in a tight embrace that caused her to drop her new dress.

Arica returned the embrace with a smile and an inward sigh, relieved that for now this ordeal was over. “Me too, Moria,” she said, closing her eyes and feeling the corn silk softness of her friend’s hair on her cheek and neck. “Me, too.”

II – HERO’S WELCOME

From the number of people lining the street on both sides, no one would ever believe this was a small village. For a rare occasion such as this, though, the entire population had turned out. Lord Draven was by far the most popular of all the visitors to the village. He always came bearing gifts, his men spent small fortunes in the village shops, and he always left behind tales of his adventures that would be repeated until he returned again.

There could be no argument that it was a spectacle indeed. Two soldiers on horseback led the parade into the village, followed by two other soldiers bearing Lord Draven's personal and unit banners high. Behind them came Lord Draven himself, resplendent in his shining black armor, long brown hair shifting in the gentle breeze, leading twelve other soldiers in perfect formation.

Lord Draven smiled broadly as he passed the peoples of the village, waving often, and throwing a knowing wink at many of the young women in the crowd. The children clamored for a better look at him, and he smiled even wider at seeing it. But where was...

There she was! His little Moria. He had made it a point to look for her when he returned. *After all*, he thought, *I have a gift for her. One she will never forget.* But that was for later. For now, he had to play the appreciative warrior, in for a visit to the people who love him most. As he rode alongside her, he paused long enough to reach down and pull her up onto his horse in front of him. He hugged her tenderly from behind as she settled in. *Gods, she smells so nice....* He broke the thought off quickly. This was neither the time nor the place for such things.

The procession continued on until they reached the end of the street, near the stables where the horses would be kept until they were ready to depart again. Lord Draven dismounted, and then reached up to help Moria to the ground again as well. As he did, he cast another glance around the village. He spotted a young girl standing in an

upstairs window of a nearby house. He squinted his eyes as he looked closer, trying to discover the identity of this girl who declined to participate in the frivolity of the parade – *his parade. Ah, yes! What was her name again? Arica. That was it.* He smiled to himself as he remembered the last time he had spent here in her company. He waved at her and his smile faltered a bit when she gave no response whatsoever. He slowly lowered his hand and shrugged. *Ah, well. I have the company of her sister at the moment, and that shall be enough.*

Arica looked out impassively as the parade began to break up and head towards the inn. She shook her head as she turned away and walked back to sit on her bed. *Did that arse that walks like a man actually wave at me,* she asked herself. *The nerve!*

Arica sat and reached between her thin mattresses, her hand resting on the object there. She took some small comfort in the feel of the item hidden there. She nodded her head once, resolutely, as she put the mattresses back in place and stretched out on them with her hand behind her head. The party would just be heating up, with the great Lord Draven spouting his fairy tale stories of majestic battles with the evil Trollocs. *How preposterous! Fighting against creatures that don't even exist.* Everyone knew that Trollocs were nothing more than legend – a fable told to children to frighten them into minding their parents. Yet the townsfolk ate up every lying word as fact, and swarmed to that fool as though he were one of the gods made incarnate.

With a sigh she rolled over onto her side and curled her legs up slightly. *And Moria eats it up more than the rest of them combined.* She just couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. She couldn't stop thinking that something bad was going to happen to Moria, but she just wouldn't believe her and accept the truth. But there was nothing she could do about it now. All she could do was hope that Moria learned the truth before it was too late.

Arica yawned, and rolled to her other side. Her eyes fluttered closed, and before she knew it, she was fast asleep.

III – A THREAD SEVERED

The first thing Arica realized when she awoke was that there was a very loud and persistent pounding at her door. Next, she realized it was dark outside. A dark shadow crossed her mind and she lurched out of bed towards the door, fearful that she knew who her late visitor would be.

As she opened the door, her heart sank as she realized those fears were not unfounded. Standing there, tears streaming down her face, was Moria. Her clothes were in disarray, as though they were either put on hastily or she had taken a fall down one of the nearby hills. Arica had a feeling it was the first of those options.

Moria looked up at Arica, her eyes red and her face puffy from crying. Her mouth worked, as if trying to say something, but pain and shame kept it from coming out easily. “It- it- it hurts,” she finally managed weakly. “Gods, it h-h-h-hurts so b-b-bad!”

Arica wrapped her friend in a firm embrace, noting how Moria winced when she touched her. Carefully she led her to the bed and sat her down gently.

“Tell me what happened, Moria. Tell me what that bastard did to you.”

It was a long while before Moria spoke, the silence broken only by her constant sobbing. Arica sat there patiently, concern a permanent mask etched into her features. She was afraid she already knew what her dear friend would tell her, and realized herself how painful it would be to say it. So she gave her silent comfort and time to collect her thoughts before the storm that would soon come.

Finally, Moria’s sobs broke off into intermittent hitching breaths, and she looked at Arica again, the pain clearly evident in her eyes as she began.

“We were all at the inn listening to Lord Draven tell us of his adventures, of his journeys to Caemlyn, and Tear. An evening meal was served, and he insisted I sit next to him. We spoke throughout the meal; he seemed so interested in how I had been since his last visit here. After the meal was finished, the other townspeople began to leave, so he

sent his men away as well. Then he invited me up to his rooms so he could give me the gift he promised me in private.”

She took a deep breath, trying against hope to prepare herself for what she was about to confess. Arica simply sat silently, her hand resting on Moria’s as she nodded once, waiting patiently for the rest of the story.

“Once we arrived in his rooms,” Moria continued, “he turned me around and kissed me. My heart leaped in my chest, Arica! For that moment, I was convinced you had been wrong. The kiss was so tender and loving, that I thought I might just melt away when he released me. He just smiled, and began to kiss me again. Then I felt his hand grabbing my arse. It startled me, and I jumped away from him. He was still standing there, smiling. He reached behind me and locked the door, then said ‘I just can’t wait one more year for this’. He reached out and grabbed me, then he... he....” Moria broke down in tears once again.

Arica pulled her closer and hugged her tight. “I’ve got a pretty bloody good idea what he did next, Moria. Don’t torture yourself any further by repeating the tale to its horrid conclusion.”

Moria cried herself out again, getting the shoulder of Arica’s dress damp in the process. Finally, she looked up at her friend again. “But it still hurts *so* bad, Arica!”

Arica quickly realized she wasn't talking about the emotional aspect of the situation. "I know, dear. It always hurts the first time. It's perfectly normal."

Moria shook her head. "I know that, but this hurts worse than I had ever been led to expect – even by you."

Arica glanced down and discovered Moria had her hands pressed tightly into her crotch. She frowned slightly as she noticed Moria's dress was a bit darker there than it was anywhere else. She looked up at her friend's face, noticing for the first time just how pale she looked.

Arica's worry deepened. "Lie back on the bed, Mori. I'll be right back."

As Moria did as she was told, Arica rushed across the room and lit a candle. Muttering a prayer under her breath, she walked back to the bed and knelt at Moria's feet.

"Mori, listen to me. I want to see if he caused you any permanent harm. You have to trust me for a moment, alright?"

Moria nodded slightly and moved her hands to her sides. Arica hissed in a breath. Blood was spreading rapidly over her friend's dress front. She cautiously reached out and lifted the dress, making sure she blocked her friend's view in the process. She held the

dress with one hand as she brought the candle closer with her other hand – a hand she now realized was trembling with fear.

Blood ran in a torrent from between Moria's legs, covering Arica's bed and pooling beneath her friend's thighs. She was no doctor, but Arica didn't need to be to know that bastard had done permanent damage – and from the speed that the blood was flowing, possibly mortal damage.

Arica lowered the dress again and quickly extinguished the candle flame before Moria could see clearly how hurt she really was. Fighting to hold back tears, Arica looked at her friend's face, and suddenly it dawned on her. Moria had been bleeding like this since she left the inn. She was paler now than when she first arrived. Arica bit back a sob as she realized it was unlikely for her friend to survive the night.

“Mori, I'm going to go get my mother and have her fetch the healer. He....” She broke off, unsure how to proceed. “He hurt you pretty bad and we need to get you looked at, but you cannot move from here right now. Okay?”

Moria looked at Arica, her eyelids fluttering uncontrollably. “Ari, I'm so cold.”

Arica bit her lip as she covered her friend in a thick blanket. “Try to rest, Mori. I'll be back quickly.”

Moria nodded, and Arica quickly made her way to the door. Once she was outside the room, she closed the door and broke into a dead run to her mother's chambers. The door there was closed as usual, and to her dismay, she could tell from the grunts and groans emanating from within that her mother was not alone.

Taking a deep breath, she pounded on the door anyway and called out "Mother! I need you for a moment!"

A deep, masculine voice from within responded. "Go away, you little bitch! I paid for the night, and I don't intend to be interrupted by some whiny brat child!"

Arica clenched her teeth as she stared at the door. *Bastard*, she thought. *I should come in there and kick you in those things you're trying to empty!*

But she knew better than to try. She turned away, and quickly returned to her own chambers to check on Moria before heading into town to find the healer and bring him here.

As she opened the door, she noticed immediately that it was silent. She couldn't hear anything, not even....

She rushed over to her bed. "Mori!" she cried out. He friend gave no response. Arica knelt at her side and placed a trembling hand over Moria's mouth. Nothing.

“Mori?” she asked, quietly, not expecting an answer since she feared her friend was now beyond answering.

She looked up into Moria’s open, unseeing eyes and her suspicions were confirmed. The spark of life was no longer there, the twinkle that was always present now extinguished.

With tears now flowing freely, Arica stumbled over to her coin purse and removed two copper marks. Slowly she returned to the bed and closed her friend’s empty eyes. Tenderly, she placed one mark over each eye, and crossed Moria’s hands over her chest. Arica placed her own head against the unmoving breast of her best friend and cried. She remained that way for a long time.

IV – VENGEANCE

Lord Draven awoke from his sleep to a faint tapping at the door to his room. Grumbling to himself at being awakened in the middle of the night, he crossed to the door in three long strides, preparing to tear into whoever this was that couldn’t wait until morning to talk to him.

He was caught off guard when he saw the young girl standing there.

“What-? Arica, isn’t it?” he stammered. Seeing her faint nod, a smile broke across his face. “Moria’s sister? What are you doing here?”

She smiled sweetly up at him. “I was disappointed you wanted to spend more time with my sister rather than me. After the times we enjoyed on your last visit, I expected you to come and greet me in my chambers. When I saw you favoring Moria, I was upset, and a little angry. I came here to apologize, and to *show* you how sorry I am.”

The grin on his face grew until Arica thought it might split his damned head in twain. *If only I could be so lucky.*

Lord Draven was obviously pleased at this turn of events. *A pair of sisters – in the same night! The luck of the Dark One is with me tonight!* He thought to himself. “Please, do come in, then, by all means,” he said to her, stepping to the side and extending his arm invitingly. “I would be most honored to have you join me, and would be most pleased to accept your *apology.*”

She smiled again and stepped into the room. As he shut the door behind her, she removed her outer cloak to reveal the dress she had just completed. Floor length, with twin slits up the sides all the way to her hips, and a neckline that plunged to her waist, leaving only two small strips covering her breasts, the outfit was made to be provocative. No one would ever believe that it also had a hiding place sewn in at the small of her back.

She turned and faced Lord Draven. He was quite taken with the outfit, especially since as she turned the slits separated enough for him to see she wasn't wearing anything underneath. She slowly back towards his rumpled bed, beckoning seductively with her head and one outstretched finger. He growled and crossed to her.

She guided him down beside her on the bed, and gently pushed him onto his back as she straddled his hips. Smiling down at him, she undid the fastening at her neck and allowed the dress to slip off of her breasts.

"Tonight, love," she said huskily, "I am here to pleasure you. You just lie back and let me take care of business." Seeing his broad grin, she kissed him gently on his neck. "Now close your eyes, and enjoy it."

She watched his face carefully as she began to move against him. His hardness was evident beneath the thin pants he wore to sleep in. She began to move in slow, circular motions, reaching behind her to steady herself. As she continued to tease him, she reached up to the hidden sheathe in the back of her dress and removed the dagger, now free of its hiding place between her mattresses. She continued to move as she leaned over to whisper in his ear.

"I know you like Moria. I also know you enjoyed her earlier tonight, even though she is still a year away from being allowed to partake in such frivolity. But that's okay. I won't tell." She rose back up fully, making sure his eyes were still closed tightly. "And

neither will you, I'm sure. But there is one small thing. You killed her you bastard. So now I'm returning the favor!"

As she said this last, she brought the dagger down with all her strength into his left eye socket. His arms flailed uselessly as he tried to throw her off of him, but she dug her knees into his sides and pressed down harder on the hilt of the dagger. His body continued to convulse and spasm for what seemed to Arica like an eternity. Finally, the spasms slowed and he lay still.

Arica waited several heartbeats before rising and yanking the dagger free of his skull. After wiping it on the sheets, she tucked it back in its hiding place and pulled her dress back into place. She pulled the cloak back over her shoulders and quickly left the room as the reality of what she had just done sank in. Once she got back into the common room, a shudder ripped through her. She pulled the cloak tighter around her shoulders and rushed out into the restless night.

V – ESCAPE

Arica had lost track of time as she wandered, her mind racing with the possibilities of what was about to happen when what she had done was discovered. She looked up to realize she was in front of Moria's house. Her mother needed to know about her only daughter, and Arica couldn't think of anyone else to tell her.

With a resigned sigh, she knocked on the door. A few moments later, Moria's mother opened the door, looking like she hadn't slept at all.

"Arica! What happened to you?" she exclaimed.

Arica glanced down and noticed for the first time that her dress and cloak were covered in Lord Draven's blood. She looked back at Moria's mother and tried to swallow the lump that had formed in her throat.

"Can I come in, ma'am? I really need to talk to you."

Moria's mother regarded her with interest. Whatever was going on, she could tell by the look on Arica's face that it was serious. "Of course, dearest. Please come in."

Arica walked in and sat down. Moria's mother sat down beside her and placed an arm around her shoulders. "What's wrong, dear? You can tell me, whatever it is."

Arica's lower lip began to tremble, and before she even realized she had begun to speak, she had poured out the entire tale, beginning with her conversation with Moria two days ago and ending with her appearance at the door minutes ago. When she stopped, she took a deep breath and looked up at Moria's mother, not at all surprised by the tears and pain she saw on her face.

The older woman opened her mouth as if to speak, but the only sound that came out was a heart-wrenching moan that sent chills down Arica's back. Before Arica fully had a chance to react, the woman collapsed into a heap on the ground, sobbing in agony. Arica faltered for a moment before dropping to her knees as well and wrapped Moria's mother in her arms, finally giving in to allow her own grief for her closest friend – a girl who in a perfect world would have truly been her sister – to emerge.

Both women lost track of time as they held each other, trying desperately to give the comfort the other needed but knowing that to do so while they were hurting so intensely would be impossible. Once their sobs drifted into tight hitches of breath, Arica dropped her head to the older woman's lap.

"I'm so sorry," she moaned. "I wish I didn't have to tell you this. I wish I could have saved her."

"I know," Moria's mother replied as she stroked Arica's hair gently. "I know you do, and I know you would have if you had been able."

She held Arica out to arm's length and looked her square in the eyes. "And while I can't say I condone what you did to Lord Draven," she continued, "I do understand the motivation behind it. I can respect that you had a choice to make, even though it would not be the choice that was best. I won't turn you in for what you did, but you have to understand it is very likely you will be caught and killed for it."

Arica shuddered, then dropped her head again and nodded. “I know. But I did what I felt I had to do! If it hadn’t been Moria, it would have been some other innocent and naïve girl from the village. That monster had to be stopped, and I knew of no other way to do it!” She looked back up at the older woman. “You can’t honestly tell me you think the local constabulary would have believed me – just a child whore – when speaking out against a person of nobility?”

Moria’s mother smiled sadly and shook her head. “No, child, of course not. You’re right. They would have most likely imprisoned you for speaking out against a Noble, and he would have gone on to hurt more people.”

The older woman stood and regarded Arica with a new light of determination in her eyes. “So in order to protect you, you need to leave here. Now. And go as far away as you can get. Come. I’ll help pack you a bag with clothes and provisions to get you started.”

Arica looked up, startled.

Moria’s mother smiled again. “Well, come on, now. Or would you rather wait and try to leave after what you’ve done has been discovered?”

Arica got to her feet and followed the older woman into the bedroom.

Some time later, as the sun was beginning to brighten the sky, Arica stood at the edge of the village beside Moria's mother, looking out at the distant mountains. She turned to the older woman and suddenly grabbed her in a massive embrace.

"Thank you," she said, fresh tears beginning to fall. "Thank you for everything. I won't forget you."

Moria's mother smiled as she returned the embrace. "I know you won't dear. And no thanks are necessary. It is I who should be thanking you, for being like a second daughter to me, and for taking such good care of Moria."

Arica snorted softly. "And what care was I taking when that bastard was violating her innocence?"

The older woman pulled back and looked her in the eyes again. "Moria was a free spirit who made her own choices. Nothing you could have done would have changed her opinion of Lord Draven fully, and you could not have prevented what happened. You have to understand that, and stop blaming yourself for it. You have your own life to lead. You can't keep dwelling on the past, on the should have beens and could have beens." She hugged Arica again, tears of her own beginning to fall. "But now you have to go. It will be full dawn soon, and Lord Draven's body will be discovered. So go, make your

own way and your own life. And maybe, if the gods will it, we will see each other again someday.”

Arica kissed the woman’s cheek and smiled. “I promise you, we will see each other again.”

Slowly the two broke the embrace. Arica turned and began to walk, her eyes remaining to the front, never looking back. The older woman watched her for some time, until she was nothing more than another speck in the early morning sun, then turned and went back into town to recover the body of her precious daughter. As she made her way to Arica’s old rooms, she prayed above hope that she would not have to lose this other daughter she had gained. Her heart ached as the emotions began swimming back again. She had managed to pull herself together with great difficulty only because the situation was so grave. Arica had always been like another daughter to her and now that bond was stronger than ever before. She had been determined not to have this new connection destroyed because Arica had loved Moria. At that moment, her only concern became how to insure Arica’s safety. But now, she mourned. She mourned the daughter she had raised and loved for twelve precious years. She mourned the times they would now never get to experience together. She mourned the beautiful young woman she would never get the chance to see. But she also mourned the daughter she should have had as well, and looked ahead fondly to the day they could all be together again.

PART TWO

Of Less Than Noble Birth

I – THE INN

The inn barely qualified as such, with cold night air whistling through inch wide cracks in the wall and a window that just wouldn't quite stay closed, no matter how hard you pushed down on it. The bed felt like lying on stone covered by a thin sheet, and the table cantered at such an angle that placing anything on it was an experiment in how long it would take for that item to hit the floor. Even the tallow candle seemed to be defective, giving off very little light no matter how high the flame waxed.

All of this mattered little to Arica as she tried to find a spot less uncomfortable on the bed to lie in. It was cheap, and that was all she felt concern over at this point. Sure, the innkeeper had made an offer for a better room, but since leaving home two weeks earlier that was not an offer she was willing to accept. She shuddered just recalling the way the innkeeper's tongue had wagged over his lips as he announced his proposition to her. She sighed deeply and gave up her fight to find comfort where there was none to be had. Rising from the bed, she crossed to the window and looked out over the sleeping village.

Small specks of light dotted the night streets as the local constabulary walked their patrols. Arica found it hard to swallow as she thought of similar patrols in her home village; patrols she felt certain would be looking for her. She closed her eyes and forced

her heart to slow from thinking about what she had left behind her. Her best friend – a girl who should have been her sister – dead, as was the man responsible for that. He had died at her hand though, prompting her run away from the nameless village.

Arica sighed and returned to sit on the bed. Only a little longer and she would be in her uncle's village, hopefully safe at last. Her mother seldom spoke of her brother Fairne, and when she did her voice was filled with spite and hate. Arica remembered all too well how her mother and grandmother had argued when Fairne left to find his own path. Her mother had insisted that he would be dead in a week; her grandmother just took it all in and quietly expressed her pleasure that he was going to get away from the corruption and decadence they were forced to live with.

Uncle Fairne had always had a kind smile for Arica, and she loved him dearly, even though she only saw him on rare occasions when he dared to venture back home. Her mother had not spoken to him in years, but Arica would slip away when he was in town to visit and spend time with her only known Uncle. He always managed to make her laugh, even more than the occasional gleeman that passed through the village on the way to Bandar Eban or Maradon or some other far-off place. He also always brought her a gift. It was never anything large or expensive, but it always came from the heart.

She smiled to herself as she remembered those few visits. She just hoped that he would not judge her for what she had done. He never before had seemed the type to do

such a thing, so she didn't know why he would start now, but things had been strange for far too long.

With another deep sigh, she lay back and tried once again to find a spot on the stone bed that was the least uncomfortable. Eventually, sleep claimed her. Sleep, and with it, dreams.

Arica awoke with a start, the scream barely held within her lips. She fought it, but a low moan still managed to break free. Sweat had plastered her hair to her head, its normal blonde color now brownish with the salty liquid. Her breath came in harsh gasps, barely enough to truly be called a breath. Her clothing was likewise plastered to her body, dripping with sweat.

Shakily, she swung her legs over the side of the bed and rubbed her face with her hands. Her eyes she kept closed tight, fighting to get rid of the image from the nightmare – Moria's cold unseeing eyes staring at her accusingly. Finally she managed to get herself under some semblance of control. She opened her eyes slowly and looked at the window.

The early morning light trickled in, casting shadows across the room. Arica crossed the room to her pack and changed quickly, as if hurrying from the room would leave the memories of the dream behind as well. She shoved her sodden clothing back into the pack and glanced at herself in the lone mirror in the room. She frowned at the

dark circles under her eyes, but other than that she looked none the worse for wear. She tied her hair back into a ponytail and left the room, slinging her pack over her shoulder as she left.

The common room was empty, as most of the visitors to the inn had yet to awaken after a drunken night laughing and gossiping. Arica made her way to a table and sat, mentally preparing herself for another day of walking.

“Can I get you some breakfast, good mistress, or maybe a bit of tea to start your day?”

Arica jerked in her seat and looked up at the woman who had spoken. She was so involved in her own thoughts she had not heard the lady approach.

The older woman smiled. “Sorry to startle you so, young miss. I am Allyna. My husband owns this inn.”

Arica scowled at the mention of the innkeeper, but held her tongue. Allyna chuckled softly at her reaction. She was not a small woman by any stretch, and the slight laughter caused her expansive stomach to jiggle. She tossed her long brown hair back and sat down beside Arica, leaning in close so no one could overhear.

“I know what he said to you last night, child. And he will feel the snap of my tongue for it when he wakes up. Tomar’s really not that bad of a man, when he doesn’t have so much drink in him that is. Not that I would expect anything resembling an apology from him this morning, though. I figure him to be too embarrassed for such pleasantries.”

Allyna turned and signaled for a serving girl to come over to the table. The girl was pretty, and not much older than Arica.

“Reyanna, please bring this young miss a plate of breakfast. Eggs and some of that ham I fixed up earlier. And a glass of tea. I think that shall do nicely.”

The girl smiled faintly, and hurried off to the kitchen. Arica looked up startled and frowned.

“My lady,” she began, slowly. “I appreciate the offer, but I have very little coin left, and a long way yet to travel...”

“Nonsense!” Allyna cut her off sharply. “After the way Tomar treated you last night, the least I can do is buy you a meal to make up for it.”

Arica closed her mouth with a snap, not realizing it was even hanging open as it was. “I don’t know how to thank you for this, my lady,” she finally stammered out.

The older woman merely smiled and waved it off. “No need for thanks, my dear. Just say you accept my apology for my fool husband, and we can call our debts even.”

“Then – I – the apology – it – I...”

Allyna laughed heartily. “I take that as acceptance, young miss, and thank you for it.”

As the serving girl brought the food, Allyna regarded Arica more seriously than before. Arica did her best to pay it no mind, and began to eat, slowly at first, then with more relish.

“If you don’t mind my saying so, young miss,” Allyna began cautiously. “You have the look of one who is deeply troubled. You know me not at all save what you have learned this day, but if there is anything I can do to help, you need only ask.”

Arica regarded her with surprise evident on her face.

“Oh, come now, child. Allyna may not be the smartest lady that ever lived, and I may not have the wisdom of the lowliest *Aes Sedai*, but I can see when a young girl such as yourself has a look about her better suited one three times your age. Trouble back home what caused you to run away like this?”

With a sigh, Arica dropped her head and stared at the floor. “You could say that.”

“You need not tell what you do not wish to, dear, but I will gladly listen to what you wish to say, and I will not judge you any less a woman for it.”

It was a long moment before Arica responded. Allyna waited patiently, a look of mild concern on her face.

“I’m on my way to Junigan Village, near the Almouth Plain to see my uncle there. My best friend was killed, and the man who did it killed as well that very night. My mother could care less for me, so I left to find one who I think would care. I wish to say no more than that, and even still I may have said too much.”

Allyna gave her a firm look. “Whatever happened to make you leave is your own affair, and none of my business, dear. I said I would not judge you, and I meant what I said. You have another week at best before you reach Junigan, and the way is no easy feat for a young girl such as yourself. Brigands and others will plague you, I fear, and may even do worse. Can you not go to your father, at least? Or find one to journey with you?”

Arica slumped further in her seat, still not meeting Allyna’s eyes. “I know no father, mistress, and there is none who I dare ask to walk with me.”

The look of concern on the older woman's face deepened, and a slight redness came to her cheeks.

“My deepest apologies about your father, child. I had no idea. And you mean to travel this entire way alone?”

Arica simply nodded, still refusing to meet Allyna's eyes.

“My dear that will never do. Wait here a moment, child.”

Allyna rose and crossed the room with an agility that belied her girth, disappearing into the kitchen. Arica sighed and pushed her food around on her plate, her appetite suddenly gone. She looked to the door and considered leaving, but she couldn't seem to allow herself to. This woman had given her food and concern. The least she could do was stay and wait for her return.

A few moments passed, and Allyna returned, accompanied by a young man perhaps a year or two older than Arica. His hair was a light brown, the color of corn silk, and his eyes were a piercing green. He stood a head taller than Arica, lithe and graceful. At his side he wore a short sword, and his clothing was better suited for a wanderer than any of the other persons she had seen in this village since her arrival. The resemblance between his features and Allyna's left little doubt that he was her son.

The young man eyed Arica with curiosity and allowed his mother to lead him to her table. Allyna resumed her previous seat as the young man stood behind her.

The older woman smiled at Arica and placed a small pouch on the table between them. It clinked as it hit the wood.

“Child, I am going to help you, and nothing you could say will change my mind once it’s made up.” She pushed the pouch closer to Arica. “This will help with expenses along the way for you. It’s not much, but it will help, and hopefully the other things I will offer you will make up for this being so small.”

Arica picked up the pouch with a stunned look on her face and glanced inside. Her breath caught in her throat when she saw the gold crown resting on top of the handful of silver marks. She looked up at Allyna, the shock evident on her face. “I – I – I – “she began to stammer.

Allyna laughed and motioned for her to be silent. “Don’t thank me yet child. I have a couple more things to offer you. Reyanna is preparing a package of food and drink for you to take along with you. It should be more than enough to reach Junigan without a chance of going hungry.” She smiled broader at Arica’s stunned silence. “I also have a couple more gifts to help you in your journey. This – “she motioned to the young man

behind her. “ – is Rytor, my son. Rytor, say hello to... I’m sorry child, but I don’t believe I ever heard your name.”

Arica struggled to make herself speak. “It’s Arica,” she finally managed to get out.

Rytor smiled and bowed formally to Arica. “Hello, Arica. Mother has agreed that I should accompany you to your uncle’s home in Junigan. I look forward to traveling with you.”

With a look of utter surprise, Arica nodded her head a fraction in response to the bow. She tried to say something – anything – but could not make her throat work around any words at all.

The young man’s smile widened as he straightened. “There are two horses awaiting us in the stables. As soon as you are ready, we can depart.”

With an effort, Arica finally caught hold of her senses. “Wait!” she exclaimed. “Hold on a minute. The coin I do understand, and am thankful for. But to offer your son – Rytor – and to give me a horse – “

“Hold on there, dear!” Allyna cut her off with a shake of her head. “The horse is merely a loan. Once you reach your uncle’s home, Rytor will bring that horse back when he returns.”

“And rest assured I will not go where I do not desire to go, Arica.” Rytor put in with a smile. “Mother told me you were traveling alone and I offered to accompany you before she could ask me to.”

Arica turned and regarded him with suspicion. “But you know nothing of me. I could be a killer who would slit your throat before we were even out of sight of the village. And how I am to know you don’t have something other than my protection in mind for this journey?”

Rytor winced. “My lady, I may be able to say nothing to set your mind at ease about my intentions. All I can do is point out that I had agreed to go with you before I even saw you or knew what you looked like. And as to your being a killer, I must trust you as much as I am asking you to trust me.”

It was Arica’s turn to wince, now. *This wasn’t what I was trying to do*, she thought bitterly. *But he does have a point there.*

“Very well,” she responded out loud. “Mistress Allyna, I thank you for your aid and accept your offer. Rytor, it would be an honor to have you escort me to Junigan Village.”

Allyna blinked and stared at Arica. “Young miss, that was said very regally. You aren’t running from the palace in Bandar Eban are you?”

“No,” Arica replied with a soft smile, a touch of sarcasm entering her voice. “I suppose I have just spent enough time around nobility that some of their mannerisms have rubbed off on me.”

The older woman allowed the smile to return to her face. “Good! It is settled then. As I have a business and a hung over husband to contend with, I will leave you young people to your journey. Be safe, and may the Light watch over you both.”

She stood to leave, but Arica stopped her. “Wait! Why are you doing this for me? You don’t even know me.”

Allyna paused without turning around. After a long moment, she spoke. “Rytor, would you attend to the horses and secure Miss Arica’s pack with hers?”

The young man bowed politely to both women and left the room. Once he was gone, Allyna turned back to face Arica.

“I had a daughter once, young miss. She was taken by some men one night as she journeyed to the village a couple of hours down the road from here. They killed her. Light knows what else they did with her first, but she was found gutted by the side of the road two days later. If I can do anything – no matter how minor or insignificant it may seem – to help someone else avoid her fate, I feel I must. That is why I offer this help to you, Arica. So that I can sleep easier tonight knowing that you are being watched over by something more tangible than the Light.”

She turned away without another word and went into the kitchen.

Arica stared after her for some time. Finally she looked down at the floor again and swallowed hard. “Burn me,” she muttered to herself. “Some people in this world do have hearts after all.”

She shook her head and headed out to find the stables.

II – THE ROAD TO JUNIGAN

Rytor was waiting in front of the stables with two horses when Arica found him. Her pack was securely fastened to one of the mounts, while the other was loaded with provisions and camping gear. The innkeeper’s son looked up as he heard her approach and smiled warmly.

“I take it we are ready to depart, m’lady?” he asked politely.

“My name is Arica, not ‘my lady’, Rytor. I’m not a noble, so please don’t address me as one.”

The smile never faltered as he extended a hand to help her onto her horse. “Of course, Arica. I meant no offense by it; I was merely showing my manners.”

She took the offered hand and got onto her mount. “I know, Rytor,” she said with a sigh. “I’m just not used to being treated with such manners. I, too, meant no offense.”

Rytor continued to smile as he leapt onto his own horse. “Well, we have about six day’s ride before we reach Junigan. The horses should cut four days off your trip, but they’ll cut nothing off if we just sit around here grinning at each other.”

Arica felt her cheeks grow warm. Without looking at Rytor, or even responding to him, she heeled her horse and took off to the edge of the village. She heard the soft laughter as he began to catch up from behind, and tried to ignore it. *Wonderful, girl*, she thought. *Your entire life around nobles and such, and here you are blushing over things an innkeeper’s son is saying. Light! They aren’t even worth blushing over!*

The two rode in silence for a time. They left the village behind, Rytor waving every now and again to the people he knew at the fringes. Arica did her best not to even look at Rytor, for fear he would try and charm her. She was not naïve, not by a long stretch, and even with his protests to the contrary she was not yet ready to fully trust the young man did not have other intentions in mind for her than protection.

They passed through another small village a little less than an hour after they had begun their journey. Rytor seemed to know a good deal of the people in this village as well. Arica tried to ignore the strange looks the townsfolk gave her as she rode slightly ahead of her companion. *Light! You'd think they never saw him with a girl before! Then again, he has been pretty sheltered....*

As they left the village, Rytor rode up alongside her. “The villages will be much further between now, Arica. We will pass through perhaps three more before we reach Junigan. That means most of our sleeping will be done on the ground between villages. It’s going to be a while before we have another inn to relax in.”

Arica nodded, finally looking over at him. *At least he's not bad looking*, she thought errantly. She caught herself nearly blushing again, but if Rytor noticed, he paid it no mind. *Where did that come from? Burn me, I must be losing my wits from being on the road so long!*

She shook her head, trying to clear it, and then noticed Rytor beginning to drop back behind her again. “Wait,” she called out, wincing as she did. Rytor came back abreast of her. “I’m sorry. You are doing me a favor, and I am treating you like an inconvenience. I’m just not ready to leap in and fully trust a man I just met.”

That smile had returned to Rytor’s face as she spoke. “I understand. I’m not offended by your actions. We’ll just have to get to know one another better on this trip.” At her blank stare, he suddenly realized the double meaning that could come from his words. Now it was his turn to blush as he stammered to explain himself.

A smile lit Arica’s face as she laughed softly. “I know what you meant, Rytor. But it’s good to know that you are not unflappable. At least not from me.” She smiled broader as she rode ahead, quite satisfied with the way his blush had deepened.

The two made camp near dusk, the next village still two days away by Rytor’s estimate. He quickly set up a small tent, which he insisted that Arica take for the night. She put up very little argument, and as she laid out her bedroll he gathered some wood and built a fire. He was just laying out his own bedroll near it when Arica pulled up a log for them to sit on. The fire completed, he pulled out rations from his pack and passed some over to her. She smiled gratefully, and the two began to eat in silence.

“Rytor, would you answer me a question?”

The young man looked up from his meal to find her looking at him with a serious expression on her face. He couldn't help but notice how the firelight played off of her pale features, making her face seem to glow in the growing dark. He swallowed hard, and replied "Certainly. You may ask me anything."

She looked back at the fire. "Why did you agree to come? I am grateful for the company and the protection, but why did you agree to leave home on such a long journey with a girl you have never met before." She glanced back up at him and asked "Is it because of what happened to your sister?"

Rytor considered this for a moment before answering. "In part, it may have been because of Myrrane. But I also had been looking for a reason to leave home and have an adventure for some time now. I suppose the two combined made your presence exactly what I had been seeking."

Arica nodded, as if this merely confirmed what she had already suspected.

"Now it's your turn," Rytor said with a slight grin. "Why are you traveling all this way?"

For a long time, Arica said nothing. Rytor was beginning to think he should not have asked at all when she replied “Do you want the real truth, or just the truth I decide to give you?”

That answer seemed to confuse him, causing the grin to fade like a candle going out. “Why, whatever truth you wish to tell me shall be the real truth in my eyes, Arica.”

She sighed deeply and looked him in the eye. “We are trying to build trust, so I will tell you the truth, even though I fear it may do more to damage the trust between us than strengthen it.”

With that she told him about Lord Draven, and how he was infatuated with Moria. Rytor’s eyes grew wide as she told him of Moria coming to her late in the night and bleeding to death in her arms. A grim look settled on his face as she told him of her own visit to Lord Draven’s rooms that night, and her subsequent flight from the village.

When she had completed her story, she looked back over at him to find him staring at her with a very grim expression.

“I suppose you will be turning me over to the town guards in the next village we reach now.”

He jerked as if struck. “Light, no I will not! Blood and ashes, Arica! To me it sounds like you did what needed to be done – no more and no less. A monster like that had no business walking this world like a man. In my eyes, this Lord Draven is no better than the tales of Trollocs or Fades. Perhaps he is even worse, since in the stories the Shadowspawn at least are motivated by the will of the Dark One. That beast was motivated only by his own sick desires!”

Arica smiled at his outburst. “Only this fairy tale is true. Lord Draven did exist, the others do not.”

Rytor visibly pulled himself back under control. “Perhaps it is men like him that inspired the stories of Fades, men without souls or conscience to guide them.”

“Possibly so.”

The young man regarded her carefully. “I think no less of you for this, Arica. Were I in your shoes, I doubt I would have had the courage to do what you did. You have my respect, if for nothing else than that.”

The smile on Arica’s face grew wider. “Yet you ride off to protect a girl you do not even know on a journey to a village far away. You possess more courage than you give yourself credit for, Rytor.”

She stood and leaned over closer to him. He smelled of sweat and smoke and the road, but Arica was shocked to discover how good all of that smelled to her. With another small grin, she kissed him sweetly on the cheek. “Thank you, brave Rytor,” she whispered in his ear, surprisingly thrilled at the way he seemed to shudder at the touch of her breath. “Thank you for everything.”

With that she turned and went to her tent, leaving him sitting by the fire, the tips of his fingers resting on the place where she had kissed his cheek, the redness of his face hidden by the glow of the fire.

Days came and went, and the two young travelers quickly fell into a routine. They would ride most of the day, pausing only to rest the horses and have a bite of lunch, and then they would make camp and talk for hours before drifting off to sleep. Both had come to enjoy the campfire conversations, often swapping who would tell the tale for the night. Arica told him of the nobles who came through her village, and even how the old lady Verelin had chased one of them through the streets with his own sword one night, both of them naked as the day they were born. Rytor told her of life at the inn and the pranks he used to play on his father and mother, and even on some of the guests. The two had quickly become friends, as is almost inevitable when two are journeying as far as these two were.

The trip was otherwise uneventful thus far, with Arica even commenting on occasion how Rytor seemed nothing more than another pack horse for the use he was having as a protector. This had been during a lunch break, and he had chased her across the fields, finally catching her and causing both of them to go rolling down the gentle slope of a hill. Through her laughter, Arica had playfully lashed him with her tongue for tearing her good coat, and he smiled the remainder of the day.

But the Pattern weaves as the Pattern wills, and good fortune is destined to not last forever. Two days outside Junigan village, Arica and Rytor learned that the Wheel has its own designs on the world.

The three men appeared from nowhere it seemed, quickly moving to block the road in front of Arica and Rytor. The men looked as though they had not seen a bath in months, and Arica found herself grateful that she and Rytor were upwind of the trio.

The two pulled reign and stopped ten paces from the three men. Rytor slowly let his hand creep towards the hilt of his sword.

“You there,” Rytor called out. “Stand down and let us pass.”

The tallest of the three men cackled at this and pointed his blade at the road. “This is *our* road, boy. It seems to me that makes you trespassers.”

The man's companions laughed heartily at this. Rytor and Arica merely stared back at them stonily.

“This is a public road, and if it belongs to anyone, it belongs to the King. I say again, stand down so we may continue on our way.”

The man cackled again, and raised the sword to point at Rytor. “Not until you pay your fine for trespassing on our road.”

Rytor tightened his grip on the hilt of his sword and gritted his teeth. “And how much is this *fine*, sir?”

The man lowered the sword slightly and seemed to consider this for a moment. “Well, me thinks thirty marks from each of you should cover the fine nicely.” He glanced at Arica and sneered. “Or ten from you if you throw in a toss with your lady there.”

Arica growled at the man as Rytor drew steel. “Try and toss with me and you'll find yourself a bloody gelding, you Light-forsaken fool,” she exclaimed through a clenched jaw.

The smiles on the bandits' faces vanished in an instant at seeing Rytor's sword and hearing Arica's threat.

The man who appeared to be the leader scowled at her. “Such language! Me thinks you need to be taught respect, bitch.”

As the three dismounted and began to approach them, Rytor leapt from his saddle and stood in their way. “If you think to harm her, you shall have to get through me, first.”

Arica also stepped down from her horse, quickly pulling her dagger from inside her coat. She eyed the men’s swords carefully, and prayed she could get close enough to use the dagger before they ran her through.

The leader stopped and a slow grin began to spread across his face. “So it’s a fight you want, children? Me can gives that to you as well.” With that he charged at Rytor.

The younger man dropped into a crouch and rolled away just as the bandit leader reached him. Jumping from his roll back into a defensive posture, he waited for the bandit to regain his balance and charge again. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Arica drop to her knees and drive her dagger into one of the other men’s groins. The man dropped like a stone and curled into a ball crying like a babe. He had time to smile as Arica picked up the man’s discarded sword before he was forced to block a strike at his head by the leader. He crouched again and spun blindly, slashing the sword in front of him. With grim satisfaction, he noticed a red line appear on the bandit’s back as his shirt

split from the blade. The man howled in anger and pain as he turned again to rejoin the fight.

Arica swung her sword wildly at the remaining bandit. The man was forced to jump back at each swing, since he could not get his own blade up in time to properly defend. Arica had no idea what she was doing, only that she refused to die and this seemed the best way to keep that from happening. She pressed on, trying to land a blow on her opponent. She could barely contain a laugh as the man tripped on a rock and landed on the ground with a hollow thud. Her amusement was short lived as he swept his legs across her ankles, tripping her as well. She threw the sword out in front of her and closed her eyes as she fell. She felt the sword strike something, then the hilt cracked her in the chin, causing her to roll to the side as she landed. Her head hit something hard and she saw stars dance before her still-closed eyes.

Rytor was getting angry. This fool was interrupting their journey, one that Arica felt was quite important to her. And this light-blinded fool had said...he was going to...to her! With a ferocity born of pure rage, Rytor struck out with his blade again and again. The bandit leader was forced back, a look of shock on his face at the intensity his opponent had suddenly garnered. He blocked blow after blow, never getting a chance to make one of his own. Rytor closed his eyes and swung again with enough force that he spun himself around. He opened his eyes in time to see the look of shock on the bandit's face just as his head slid off of his body. Rytor dropped to his knees, breathing hard and staring at the decapitated figure before him.

The world swam as Arica forced herself to her feet. She was not sure how long she had been lying there, but since she was still alive and not being violated, it could not have been too long. She looked around quickly for the man she had been fighting, but had to stare to comprehend the sight that greeted her. The sword she had been using was standing straight up, as if it had grown from the ground like a small tree. The point of the blade was buried in the throat of the man she had been fighting. His glazed eyes stared uncomprehendingly at the sky, seeing nothing, the shock still evident on his face. Arica jumped up with a gag, the realization at how close that came to being her fresh in her mind. She jumped again when she felt an arm around her shoulders.

Turning quickly, she found her face pressed against Rytor's chest, his strong arms around her shoulders. Tears began to slip down her cheeks as the understanding of what all had happened in the last month hit home again. Now she had killed two men, and badly injured a third. Killing was becoming so easy for her, and the thought of it terrified her.

Rytor stroked her hair as he held her close. "Are you alright, Arica?" he asked softly, but the only answer he received was the gentle rocking of her sobs against his chest.

III – JUNIGAN VILLAGE

Junigan Village did not live up to its name, as it was actually more along the size of a small city. High walls surrounded it on all sides, and guards stood at each gate into or out of the city. Merchants of all shapes and sizes could be seen entering or leaving through one of the gates. Arica and Rytor had to stop in the line that had formed to get into the East Gate.

Craning her neck, Arica could see that the guards were stopping people as they entered. From this distance, she could not hear what they were asking the travelers they stopped, but her heart began to race regardless. *What if word has already reached here? Would they still be after me even here on the border of the disputed lands of Almoth Plain?* A thousand possibilities raced through her mind, very few of them even remotely pleasant to consider.

Rytor seemed to notice her nervousness and inched his mount closer. “Arica, no one will care about those three brigands we dispatched a couple of days ago,” he said. He remembered her breakdown following that confrontation, and had mistaken her anxiety here for something related to that.

Arica shook her head slowly. “It’s not those brigands that concern me, Rytor. It’s a certain now dead Lord and the circumstances surrounding his demise that I fear.”

With a start, Rytor understood what had her so on edge. She was afraid these guards would arrest her on sight for the murder of Lord Draven. He leaned closer and

spoke softly, so only she could hear. “If they ask your name, give a false one. You may ask about your uncle if you desire, but do not tell them your true name. Best yet, let me do all the talking here. What is your uncle’s name?”

She eyed him warily. “Fairne. Fairne Treamon. I know he is one of the guards here, but I know nothing of where to find him within the walls.”

He nodded his head and gave her arm a gentle, reassuring squeeze. “It will be alright, Arica. I promise you that.”

It took almost a half an hour before they reached the gates and the men who stood watch over them. One of them – the higher ranking one Arica supposed, by the knot at his shoulder – stepped over to them as they reigned in the horses.

The guard regarded them emotionlessly. “State your name and business.”

Rytor held his head high and spoke with an almost regal bearing. “I am Rytor al’Monar. This is my lady, Myrrane. We are merely passing through Junigan on our way to Caemlyn. My lady has never seen a large city such as that. We also hoped to catch up to a friend here, one we have not seen in an age.”

The guard looked mildly irritated at the long answer he had received to a question that did not require one, but he held the irritation in check. “What is this friend’s name? Does he reside here, or is he staying at one of our fine inns?”

It took only a brief moment to remember the name Arica had given him. “His name is Fairne Treamon. He is a member of the city guards. Perhaps you know him, or where we could find him?”

The guard actually smiled at this. “You are friends of Fairne’s?”

“Yes,” Rytor responded, hiding the nervousness that suddenly began to rise in his belly. “We are. He knew my lady’s uncle quite well.”

The guard laughed. “You can find Captain Treamon in his quarters at the barracks, in the Northern part of the town. Have a good journey, and may the Light walk with you Master Rytor and Mistress Arica.”

It was hard for Arica to tell who was more startled by this, her or Rytor. Both of them seemed to jump equally as high, adding to the amusement of the guard. Finally, she regained enough of her composure to speak, apparently well before Rytor was able to do the same.

“How – how did you...?”

The guard laughed even harder. “Young mistress, yesterday morning Captain Treamon called all of us gate guards to his office and told us his niece may be on her way here. He had a very fine drawing of you on parchment that he acquired during his last visit home that he showed to all of us. I was not sure you were who he had mentioned until your gentleman here stated his name. The Captain was not expecting you to be traveling in company, but that matters very little. He is in his quarters at the barracks, and he is expecting you. Now I ask that you please move on, as there are many others behind you who would also like to enter the gates.”

With a start, Arica managed to get her horse moving again, though she had to reach out and smack Rytor on the arm to get him moving on as well. The two passed through the gates to the fading laughter of the guard.

The barracks of the city guards was not difficult to find, especially since it was the second largest structure in the town, other than the Mayor’s Manor. The walls were tall and whitewashed, looking as strong as any city walls. A wrought iron fence surrounded the building, with small guard towers at each corner. A man stood guard at the only entrance through the fence covered in armor and carrying a large spear. A long sword hung at his belt.

When they approached, the guard showed Arica and Rytor where the nearest stable was so they could drop off their horses. Once they had done so and paid the stable boy, they returned to the barracks on foot.

The man at the gate stopped them and asked pleasantly what he could do for them.

Arica stepped forward. "I am here to see my uncle, Fairne Treamon."

The guard seemed to stiffen, standing up straighter and holding his head high. "Captain Treamon has been expecting you, my lady. He is in his quarters on the upstairs level at the end of the hall. Wait here a moment and I will let him know you have arrived."

The man spun on his heels and summoned another guard, who he spoke with quietly for a moment. The second guard hurried into the barracks as the first returned to his post. "He will be with you in a moment, my lady."

After a few minutes, an older man came to the gate. His uniform bore the markings of the captain of the guard, and his bearing convinced any who may have doubted them. A shock of silver ran through his short, dark hair, and his eyes seemed to twinkle in spite of the hardness they bore. His face was stern, yet kind, giving clue that the man could go from soft to hard and back again in mere seconds. A smile broke across

his features as he approached the gate and saw Arica. He quickened his pace and grabbed her in a massive hug that lifted her feet from the ground.

“Arica!” he bellowed, spinning her around. “It is so good to see you again! You seem to have grown since I visited last.”

Arica hugged him back with a smile that rivaled his own. She noticed out of the corner of her eye that Rytor was smiling as well. “It’s good to see you as well, Uncle,” she said. “I just wish the circumstances were better.”

Fairne put her down and held her at arm’s length from him. “Then perhaps we should go upstairs and talk, my dear. I have heard rumors, and I hoped you’d come to explain them to me.” He finally noticed Rytor, still standing to the side, smiling. “And who is this young man? Is this your gentleman, Ari?”

The younger man stepped forward and extended a hand. “I am Rytor al’Monar, sir. I merely traveled with Arica to keep her safe from brigands on her journey here. Even though I would be honored for it to be so, I am not her gentleman.”

The captain took Rytor’s hand and shook it. “Gentleman or no, I can see you are her friend, and any friend of my little Ari’s is a friend to me as well, Rytor al’Monar. Come, both of you! Allow me to give you a meal and a drink as well.”

He released Rytor's hand and led the two into the barracks, up to his quarters. He sat Arica down once they got there and insisted she tell him what caused her to come such a distance while he set about preparing lunch for them.

“And so I came to you, Uncle,” Arica finished.

Fairne set plates filled with food in front of her and Rytor then took one for himself and sat down, saying nothing. He regarded the girl closely for a moment, and then slowly nodded his head.

“I had long suspected that Draven was such a fool. He was much too careless in battle, and much too anxious to visit our old home. Did anyone see you enter his rooms that night, my dear?”

Arica thought for a bit and then slowly shook her head. “I do not think so, Uncle, but cannot be sure of it.”

The captain nodded again and smiled. “No matter then, little Ari, you are as safe here as if in the womb again. Though your mother's womb was probably not all that safe, come to think of it.”

Rytor choked on a piece of meat at this, and swallowed hard before regarding the older man with a look of surprise. Fairne chuckled at him.

“Ari here will tell you there is no love lost between myself and my sister. Our mother’s blood holds us as family, but there is no force enough to hold us as friends as well.” The older man turned his attention back to his niece. “So what are your plans from here, my dear? I would be more than glad to arrange a place for you to live, and a way to earn coin as well that is more honorable than the ‘family business’.” This last he said with such contempt that Rytor almost choked again.

The young girl sat silently for a long while. What *was* she going to do now? This was not something she had considered past this point. Something began to nag at her; something Rytor’s mother had said or asked.... Finally she looked up again and caught her uncle’s eyes.

“Uncle,” she began slowly. “What do you know of my father?”

Now it was Fairne’s turn to almost choke. “Wha – what?” he stammered out.

“My father. What do you know of him?”

Fairne regarded her carefully before he spoke. “I know some, Arica. More than I care to, at any rate. Why do you ask?”

She took a deep breath and tried to prepare herself for this mentally. *Too late now, I've already started this. I have no choice but to see it through.* “I never knew who my father was – is – and I guess a part of me wants to know. I’ve always known myself as Arica Treamon, but with the way my mother has treated me of late, I refuse to have the same name as her, no offense to you, Uncle.” She smiled faintly at his unconcerned nod. “I just want to know who he was, perhaps to meet him. Maybe I can find more honor in sharing his name than my own.”

It was a long while before Fairne answered her. Arica had almost given up on receiving an answer when he said quietly “He was from Katar.”

With a deep sigh, Fairne leaned back in his chair and looked at Arica evenly. “Some minor nobility, truth be told. He came to the village while he was part of the patrols along the disputed lands. He told grand tales of his skirmishes with Tarabon, and fighting Shadowspawn – as if they had come down in droves from the Blight.”

Arica managed to control her smile at the mention of the fairy tales. *If I didn't know better, I'd think he believed those old stories.* She noticed her uncle looking at her impatiently, as if he wanted to finish this story before he changed his mind. She nodded for him to continue.

“As I was saying,” he continued with a snort. “Everyone called him Lord d’Oronarico, but I found out in the inn one night his name was Varison. He was the son of the town’s mayor, who himself is reported to be a relative of the Domani King. Whether or not there is any truth to that claim is not in my knowledge, but stranger things have happened. When I found out your mother was pregnant, I started looking into d’Oronarico’s past. Huh. Turns out he is a bastard himself, one that the Katarian Mayor tolerates because of his wife’s irritation at his indiscretions. He’s got him a fancy suite of rooms up in the manor there, and walks around like he’s more important than he is, but there you go. That’s all I know of your father, dear. And I wish I knew less than that, for I fear I now know what you intend to do next.”

Rytor looked up at him with a start, quickly switching his gaze to Arica, who now sat with a look of determination on her face.

“I have to know, Uncle,” she was saying. “If this man is my father, and he does carry the weight he appears to, perhaps he can help me with the problems back home.”

“You intend to go back there?”

She considered this. “No,” she replied after a moment. “But it would be nice to be able to visit without looking over my shoulder for the guards to take me.”

The aging captain sighed. “Then I wish you good fortune on your way. Know that you are welcome to take my offer and remain here, and the offer will always be on the table to you.” He looked over at Rytor, who was now listening with rapt attention. “And you, boy. Do you mean to continue to watch over my niece?”

The younger man looked up at him and a resolved look came across his face. “Sir, if you could deliver word to my mother in Handor Village, I shall watch over and protect her for as long as she will have me.”

Fairne nodded once and smiled at Arica’s shocked reaction. “I cannot deliver the message myself, but I will make sure it is done. Have the letter to me by morning. There is parchment and a quill in the desk beside the door.”

Arica caught Rytor’s arm as he rose. “Are you sure, Rytor? You don’t have to do this.”

The older man snorted again. “Light take me he doesn’t! He has kept you safe this far, girl, and someone needs to continue to do so.”

The young man glanced at the captain and then smiled faintly at Arica. “Arica, I promised to watch you, and I’m a man of my word. If your journey is not finished here, then neither is mine. I will see you to Katar and beyond that if need be.”

With that, he continued to the other room to write his letter to his mother. Arica let her arm fall and looked at her uncle.

“That boy is impossible at times.”

A hearty laugh escaped Fairne’s mouth. “Then he is a perfect match for you, my dear! I seem to remember you getting in more than your share of trouble back home. And besides,” he said quickly, cutting off the rebuttal about to come from Arica. “That boy has eyes for you. Think on that – you could do much worse than a man with that much devotion to you and your well-being.”

That comment took away any words she might have been ready to speak. He startled gaze went quickly from her uncle’s laughing face to the doorway Rytor had departed through. *Surely not*, she thought. *Rytor is a sweet boy to be sure, but he has a thing for me?*

Fairne laughed even harder. “Girl, you have been in that village too long if you cannot see how he looks at you. That boy is quite enamored with you. He’s got too much pride to admit it unless he thinks you feel the same, but it’s definitely there to one who knows what to look for.”

“If this is so, then are you sure it a good idea he travels with me? It is just the two of us alone out there, and I don’t want...”

“Girl, if I know you half as well as I think I do, you can handle anything that he may do. Unless he confesses his undying love for you – that might throw you off a bit.”

She scowled at the older man, causing him to double over from the increase in laughter. Rytor picked that very moment to reenter the room, of course. He smiled in confusion at the angry and slightly embarrassed look on Arica’s face and the bellowing laughter of her uncle.

“Did I miss out on something?” he asked innocently, causing Fairne to laugh even harder than before, tears streaming from his eyes.

“Enough! You’re going to kill this old man!” Fairne cried between gales of laughter.

IV – TO KATAR

The pair waited until morning to leave, enjoying Fairne’s hospitality and accepting his offer to sleep in his quarters since he had night duty and would not be there. He prepared them breakfast and walked them to the stables to fetch their horses. He turned to Arica while Rytor went to prepare their mounts and smiled at her fondly.

“Are you sure I cannot convince you to stay, even for another day or so?”

She smiled back up at him and wrapped him in a hug. “No, Uncle, you cannot. But I do promise to visit you again once I have this problem straightened out.”

The older man returned the hug with a sigh. “I was afraid you would say that.” He held her out and looked her square in the eyes. “Just don’t stay away as long this time. I miss you, Ari.”

Rytor walked the horses over to the pair and smiled. Fairne turned and extended a hand to the young man.

“Young master, it has been a pleasure to have met you.”

The young man took the hand and his smile widened. “Likewise has it been an honor to meet you, sir.”

Fairne clapped him on the shoulder and gave him a stern look. “I expect you to keep my niece safe and out of harm’s way. Should you fail in this, you will not consider our next meeting to be such a pleasure. Light walk with you, and may you find your way in it.” He leaned closer and whispered so only Rytor could hear. “And I think she may see you as you see her before it is all said and done.”

A look of shock and confusion crossed Rytor's face, causing Fairne to laugh once again.

“Enough, boy! I cannot take another bout of this like last night!”

With another smile, Fairne turned back to Arica, kissed her softly on the cheek, and helped her onto her horse. He smiled at her again, got one back in return, and turned to return to the barracks.

Rytor leapt onto his horse and watched the man walk away. He glanced over at Arica and saw the tears standing in her eyes. “Are you ready?” he asked softly.

Arica wiped the tears away and turned to him. “Lead the way, great protector.”

Side by side, they exited the city gates.

The two set up camp hours later, as the sun began to drop below the mountains in the distance. Rytor started a fire as Arica collected rations from their saddlebags to serve as their evening meal. They prepared the food and ate in a comfortable silence.

Arica found herself stealing glances at Rytor throughout the meal. Once, when he turned at just the right moment and caught her watching him, she thought her face would

explode from the heat that filled it. She had looked away quickly, but not before she saw the easy smile appearing on his face. *Light*, she thought nervously. *If he flashes that smile at me a few more times, I will lose my wits near him!*

She remained by the fire while he replaced the utensils they had used for the meal. Before long, Arica found herself lost in the flames as they danced across the blackening wood. So entranced by the fire was she that she never noticed Rytor sitting back down beside her. She jumped as she felt a cloak being placed across her shoulders.

“Sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to startle you. I noticed you shivering and thought this might help to cut the wind a bit.”

Arica smiled at him and shrugged into the cloak, wrapping it around her against the night chill. “Thanks. I guess summer couldn’t last forever. It looks like winter will be here long before we are ready for it.”

He nodded agreement. “I think I could live forever in a place where the sun always shone.”

She laughed good-naturedly. “You could always go live in the Aiel Waste. I hear it’s always hot there.”

He joined in her laughter. “Except at night, I hear. Then you freeze faster than rolling in snow.” He looked at her and sighed. “But then again, that may be a bit too hot for my liking.”

As she glanced over at him, their eyes met. She held his gaze evenly, and swallowed. “I don’t know, this seems plenty warm enough for me.” Before she could stop herself, she was leaning forward towards him. Her eyes closed as their lips met in a soft kiss. Her mind swam as their lips touched, and warmth spread through her from the crown of her head to the soles of her feet. *Burn me! Why didn’t I do this sooner? For that matter, what AM I doing?*

With an effort, she pulled away and quickly looked back to the fire.

“I’m sorry, I –“

“I didn’t mean to – “

Both of them spoke at once and both likewise stopped at once. Arica tuned to look at him again, and they both smiled. “I think we mean the same thing even though we don’t really mean it,” she said with a slight waver in her voice.

He simply nodded and continued to smile. Finally he stood and stretched. “I think we had best get some sleep. We have another long day ahead of us tomorrow.”

Arica rose as well and looked up at him so she could see his face. She smiled again at the nervousness she saw etched there. “Rytor, you, ah, that is...” She took a deep breath and tried again. “You don’t have to sleep out here tonight, if you don’t want. You are more than welcome to sleep in the tent with me.” Quickly she added, “Since the wind is picking up, I mean. So you can keep warm too.” A bright blush spread from her neck as she realized that that could be taken another way as well.

Rytor swallowed hard and forced a smile. “Thank you, Arica. But I think I’ll be fine out here at least for this night. The wind is not too bad, yet. If it’s no offense to your generous offer.” He added this last hastily, not wanting to hurt her feelings.

With a sigh of relief she didn’t realize would come, she nodded. “No offense taken. Just remember the offer is there if you do get cold.”

The two looked at each other for a long moment. Finally, Arica smiled and said “Good night, my protector.”

He returned the smile. “Good night to you, my lady fair.”

Both of them blushed slightly at this, Arica from the sweetness and innocence of the comment, Rytor out of disbelief he had stated what he was thinking. Almost as an afterthought, Arica leaned up and kissed him again, sweetly, this time on the cheek. He

ran his fingers down the side of her face gently; smiling at the shiver she gave that had nothing to do with the cold. They turned away at the same instant, Arica headed to the tent, Rytor to his bedroll. Neither looked back, but both still saw themselves wrapped in that first kiss as if it were still happening.

Sleep was a long time coming for them both.

The temperatures continued to drop during the trip, even causing them to wear full cloaks during the day near the end. After the second night, Rytor moved his bedroll into the tent as well, and the tent was moved closer to the fire.

Neither spoke of the kiss they had shared that night, though both thought of it often. Every now and again, one would catch the other looking at them, but they always looked away quickly, for whatever good it did them then.

The journey was pretty well uneventful, except for the night a pair of wolves wandered into the camp. Rytor managed to chase them out with a torch before they managed to get any of their food, but nevertheless they began to leave the rations on the horses until it was needed.

Then, two days outside of Katar, they met the old man.

He was wandering along the side of the road, headed back the way they had come. His clothing was ripped and torn in a dozen places or more, and the filth that covered him seemed to be several layers thick. A limp was evident as he shambled down the road talking to – no one.

Rytor wore a look of concern as he pulled his horse up to a stop several feet ahead of the man. Arica stopped right beside him and leaned close.

“Who is he talking to?” she asked quietly.

Her companion shook his head. “Himself, it appears. Very odd indeed. I’ve never seen the likes of this.”

The old man shambled closer, almost walking into the horses before he realized they were there. He looked at the animals with a start, and then leaned in towards one of them, ignoring the riders completely. Arica and Rytor exchanged a look of confusion as the man began whispering to the horse as if it were a person.

“You there, man,” Rytor called out. “Step away from my lady’s horse!”

The old man looked over at Rytor, finally seeing him for the first time. He scowled at him, and then shifted his gaze to Arica. He stared at her for a moment before

the color drained from his face and he fell backwards, screaming two words at the top of his lungs.

“*Aes Sedai! Aes Sedai!*”

Arica looked at Rytor, confusion and fear evident in her face. The young man shrugged and shook his head, indicating he had no idea what this was about either. She looked back at the old man.

“What do you want? What is wrong with you?” she asked angrily.

The old man continued to whimper incoherently. Finally he spat out a few things that were understandable, even though Arica or Ryder neither one could figure out what they meant.

“I’ll no more embrace *saidin!* Spare me, *Aes Sedai!* Chase me no more!”

Patience quickly fading, Arica stared at the man. “What are you talking about? I’m no *Aes Sedai!* Who is chasing you?”

“I believe he is referring to us, young miss.”

Arica's head snapped in the direction the voice had come from. She and Rytor had been so involved in what the old man was doing they had not seen the three women approach. They were all well-dressed, looking more like nobility than wanderers or militia. All had skin so smooth it was impossible to determine how old they were. Arica also could not help but notice that all three wore identical serpent rings, the serpent eating its own tail.

The old man noticed them too, and began screaming louder and scrambling to get away.

One of the three women frowned and eyed the man warily. "Oh, do be quiet, fool. You cannot run from us." She flicked her fingers out and the man froze where he was. His eyes showed that he still wanted to get away, but something held him solidly in place.

"What are you doing? Leave him alone!" Arica cried as Rytor started to reach for his sword.

The woman who spoke – the leader of the three, it seemed – glanced at her dispassionately. "Young one, this is none of your concern. I would advise you to stay out of *Aes Sedai* business that does not involve you."

There was no hiding the open shock on Arica and Rytor's faces. "You're *Aes Sedai*?" Rytor asked softly. Arica was still trying to gather herself enough to speak.

The *Aes Sedai* nodded once to him. “Yes. We are sisters of the Red Ajah, and we mean to take this man back to Tar Valon so that we may carry out his sentence.”

Arica finally managed to speak. “What is his crime, if it does not offend you for me to ask?”

The Red Ajah smiled. “He is a channeler. We are taking him to the White Tower to be gentled.”

“Gentled?” Rytor asked.

One of the other *Aes Sedai* answered him. “He will have his ability to touch the One Power stripped from him.”

“But why must this be done? Don’t *Aes Sedai* use the One Power?” Arica blurted out, quickly clamping a hand over her mouth almost before the last word was even all the way out. She had heard the stories – it was not wise to question the will of the *Aes Sedai*.

If the sisters were offended or disturbed by the outburst, they showed no sign of it. The same sister that responded to Rytor answered her as well. “Once long ago, in the Age of Legends, there were men who were *Aes Sedai*. According to the legends, they were responsible for the breaking of the world. When they touch the source, madness

follows them, as this man so aptly demonstrates. We cannot allow a man who can channel to roam free, for fear of another breaking.”

The old man, who had been silent since he had been held, finally spoke again. “The second breaking is inevitable. He Who Comes will return! The Dragon is coming! Already he walks among men and waits for the signs. The Prophecies will be fulfilled!”

All other conversation and movement stopped as every eye turned to the old man. The leader of the *Aes Sedai* came off of her horse so quickly no one could say they had seen her move. In a flash, she had crossed to the man and stood looking at him, anger and fear in her eyes. “What are you talking about, old man?” she demanded.

He looked up at her and smiled a broad toothless grin. “The Dragon is coming, *Aes Sedai*. He will break the world once again and set us all free.”

The woman snorted with contempt. “And you are a fool.”

The man’s grin widened. “Not even your precious White Tower will survive unscathed. It will break as well as the world will.”

The fear was growing dominant in the woman’s eyes as she turned to Arica and Rytor. “It is time for you to leave, children. Now. Continue on your way and forget you

ever saw this. This man is more dangerous and further fallen to madness than we had thought.”

“But he sounds coherent now –“Arica started, but the woman cut her off before she could finish the statement.

“I said NOW girl! Do not make me say it again, or you shall feel my wrath as well!”

Rytor reached over and laid a hand on Arica’s arm. She looked over to see his eyes pleading with her to let this go and do as she said. Reluctantly, Arica nodded and heeled her horse. They rode slowly until they passed the other two *Aes Sedai*, and then sped up to a fast trot.

They made it over the next hill before they heard the man’s pained scream that suddenly cut itself off.

Neither of them mentioned the encounter, not even when they struck camp that night.

V – CONFESSIONS

Rytor walked into the common room and quickly looked around for Arica. They had arrived here mere hours before, and he had gone out to see where Lord d'Oronarico was – if he was even in the city. His search had not taken long, and now he was coming to let Arica know that the man – her father – was indeed in his rooms at the manor house.

The city was considerably different from Junigan, almost twice the size. Instead of dirt roads, the streets here were covered in cobblestones. Even the mayor's manor house dwarfed the one back in Junigan as it stood shining on a hill at the south end of the city.

Arica was sitting at a table near the stairs in the common room. Her back was to the wall so that she could clearly see who was coming in the front doors – a suggestion Rytor himself had made to her, and was glad to see she had taken. The room was not even half full at dusk, though Rytor was expecting more once the sun had completely set and the gleeman that the innkeeper seemed so anxious to announce began telling his stories and singing his songs.

He made his way across to Arica's table, stopping once to ask a serving girl to bring him some food and something to drink. Once he reached the table, he pulled out a chair and took a seat. Arica looked at him expectantly.

“Well,” she asked. “What did you learn? Is he here?”

“Yes, he is,” the young man responded with a grin. He smiled more when Arica breathed a sigh of relief. “According to the guard I spoke with, he will be in the city for a few days more before heading off to Bandar Eban for a diplomatic assignment from his father.”

The relief was evident in Arica’s face and voice. “Wonderful! I would hate to think I came all this way after getting up the nerve to do so only to discover that he was away for a few months.”

She paused as the serving girl approached and placed a plate and glass in front of Rytor. “Can I get anything for you, mistress?”

Arica shook her head and waited until the girl had dismissed herself before continuing. “I will go to the manor in the morning and speak with him. Feel free to wander the city while I’m there. I will meet you back here at dusk, hopefully to bring you into my father’s home for the remainder of our stay here.”

Rytor had stopped eating and was looking at her with a frown. “Are you certain you do not want me to come along with you? If he decides that a daughter would be nothing but trouble for him, or that you are lying to try and get money from him – “

“Nonsense! He will not harm me, Rytor. I can take care of myself if needs be. I would just feel more comfortable approaching him alone at first, to break the news to him. I have a feeling it may come as a shock to him.”

“It most likely will at that,” Rytor snorted. “I will accept your judgment in this, even though I do not agree with it.”

All arguments faded as he saw the beautiful smile that lit her face. His own face began to redden at the look she was giving him.

“Why, I could almost think you had feelings for me, great protector.”

His blush deepened. He sat quietly for a moment before answering her. “Of course I have feelings for you, Arica,” he began. “I have been watching over you for near a month now, how could I not care for your safety – “

With a laugh she cut him off. “That is not what I mean and you know it. But that is alright. When you are ready to tell me the truth, I will be ready to listen to it.”

She smiled again, softly, and stood up. “I’m going to have a bath, then go to my room to think, Rytor. Stop and let me know when you are going to your room as well?”

He nodded and looked up as if remembering something. “You aren’t going to stay and watch the gleeman?”

“No,” she said with a shake of her head. “I’ve had enough things happen to make a few stories of my own. I have no desire to hear a gleeman tell things that are not true after experiencing that. At least not tonight. I have too many other things on my mind to be able to enjoy him.”

With that, she turned and walked to the back of the inn, where the bath houses were. Rytor was left sitting alone and wondering just how he had allowed himself to get mixed up with this infuriating Domani woman.

Arica’s room was the one next to Rytor’s, and he had to pass her door to get to his. He stood at her door for a long moment before passing it by to get to his room. He, too had gotten a bath after he finished eating, so he now came up to change into fresh clothes as well. After he had tugged on his boots again, he sat and stared at the wall separating the two rooms. Finally he nodded as if reaching a decision, then stood and exited the room.

As she heard the soft tapping at her door, Arica smiled. She walked slowly over to the door and opened it a crack. As she had suspected, Rytor stood there looking freshly bathed and quite nervous.

“I wondered what was taking you so long. I had begun to think you were going to stay and see the gleeman yourself.”

Shakily, he gave her a weak smile and shook his head. “No, I thought maybe we could talk before we went to sleep. We won’t have much chance to tomorrow.”

She turned to the side and extended her arm invitingly. “Then do come in, Rytor.”

He entered the room on legs that seemed as if they could barely hold him. His knees seemed to lose more strength when he looked over at her as she closed the door and threw the lock. She was wearing a pale blue dress that came to just below her knees and seemed to cling to every curve of her body. Her loose hair hung to just past her shoulders, still damp from her bath. She padded over to the bed on bare feet and sat down, tucking her legs underneath her as she did so. He looked around and pulled the lone chair closer to her and sat down as well, grateful that he did not fall as he did so.

Arica smiled at him warmly. “Well, great protector, here we are. What did you want to talk about?” *As if I couldn’t guess by the way you’re acting there*, she added to herself. He could not see that her heart was racing as well, and had been since he knocked on the door. She was just better at hiding her nervousness than he was.

He swallowed hard and looked at her evenly. Without trying, his eyes locked with hers, taking the words from his mouth and forcing him to start again after looking away for a moment.

“Arica, I need to tell you something, and I’m not sure how you will react to it. You see, I – that is, since we – when – “ He broke off and swallowed again, fighting visibly to compose himself enough to say what he wanted to say.

The realization came to her like a slap to her face. *Light! He’s never felt like this before!* Her smile faltered a bit until she forced it back to its previous intensity. *I can’t hurt this boy. Not when he has these feelings for the first time. I will have to be honest with him, so I guess I need to figure out quickly what it is I feel for him as well!*

He seemed to have composed himself a bit, but also seemed unsure of how to continue. She reached out and placed a hand on his forearm, causing him to look up at her again. “Go on,” she told him softly. “Please go on.”

Her words seemed to give him courage, as he nodded and smiled weakly again.

“You see, since we have been traveling together, we have gotten to know each other pretty well and...” Here he stumbled over his words again. He took a deep breath and looked her in the eyes again. She was almost taken aback by the pure emotion and intensity of his gaze. “When we first started out, you were like the damsel in distress

from a gleeman's tale. You were a reason for me to have an adventure. But now, after we have spent so many nights talking and laughing with each other, all of that has changed.”

With that, he stood and walked over to the window, staring out at the darkened streets below. “I cannot go back home now, Arica. Not unless I knew you would be coming with me.”

Her heart leapt into her throat and seemed to hang there as she stared at his back in disbelief. *Blood and ashes! What is he saying? He couldn't be....* His words cut off her thoughts, as she did not want to miss anything he might say next.

“I am not asking you to marry me, Arica. I doubt either one of us is ready for that, but I want to remain with you in your travels until perhaps we *are* ready. I do not want us to part. With you going to speak with your father tomorrow, our parting is a very real possibility now. I could not bear that.” He turned to look at her again, his intense green eyes boring into her crystal blue ones. “I love you, Arica.”

She tore herself away from his gaze so she could gather her thoughts and wits enough to respond. Her heart hammered in her chest and her breath was coming in short bursts. *Why am I so anxious at that, she thought confusedly? Light! I was expecting most of that, so why is it such a shock to hear him say it?* She looked back up at him, tears standing unbidden in her eyes. Their gazes locked again.

“As I told you, I do not know what your reaction to this confession will be,” he continued, his voice breaking as he spoke. “But I had to tell you how I felt before the feelings tore me apart.”

With an effort, Arica found her voice. She had no idea what was going to come out, but she spoke anyway, content that whatever she said would be the truth.

“Rytor, I would not accept a proposal of marriage from you right now. But that’s not to say I would not at another point in the future. I cannot believe that you would feel so strongly towards me after the life I have led. I have given myself willingly more than I care to consider. My life has been spent living amongst harlots and as a harlot at times. I am not proud of it; in fact the thought of it shames me. It’s hard for me to accept that a man could truly love me after knowing of my past, and if what I have said changes how you see me, I would understand completely.”

He quickly moved to the bed and sat next to her, taking her hands in his own. “Your past doesn’t concern me, Arica. Only the person I met in my father’s inn concerns me. Your past has made you who you are, and for that I am actually thankful for it. I didn’t fall in love with who you were before, my lady. I fell in love with who you are. I love *you*, Arica Treamon d’Oronarico.”

Arica did not try to stop the tears that fell freely down her cheeks as she looked deep into Rytor’s eyes and saw the truth behind his words. He meant every word he was

saying without exception. In that moment, she realized there was no need to fight or deny the emotions that were rushing to the surface in waves. He loved her for who she was, and nothing would change his mind. She leaned forward and wrapped him in a warm embrace, holding him so tightly she could feel each rise and fall of his chest as he breathed. She savored his warmth and closeness for a moment before withdrawing enough to meet his eyes again and expressing what she never thought would be possible for her to express.

“I love you, Rytor al’Monar. I never thought I would ever love any man, but I love you.”

His smile could have lit all of Caemlyn. With a small laugh, she leaned closer and kissed him, her arms snaking around his neck as he caressed her face. Gently, she pushed him back until he was lying on the bed with her beside him, never breaking the kiss.

She smiled at him as she moved down and began removing his boots. Once they were off, she moved back up and began to trail soft kisses down his neck as she undid the ties of his tunic. She ran her hands across his strong chest, smiling again as a soft moan escaped his lips. He stopped her as she reached for the catch on his belt and forced her to look him in the eyes again.

“Are you sure about this, Arica?”

She gave him a wicked grin and nuzzled her nose against his before looking him in the eyes again.

“More than I have ever been about anything before, my love.”

With that, she resumed her previous endeavor and unfastened his belt, then his breeches as well. She smiled again at the quick flutters she noticed in the muscles of his stomach as she began to slide his pants down his legs. She was pleased to see that he wore nothing underneath them.

Once she had him completely naked, she straddled him and leaned down to kiss him again, a silent thrill running through her as she witnessed his discovery that she wore nothing under her dress either.

She moved on him slowly, savoring every second of their union. This was not her first time, but she had never felt this before. *So this is what it feels like to do this with someone you truly love*, she thought briefly, before the sensations became too much to allow for conscious thought.

Slowly, the world began to come back to her as he rolled over to lie beside her. She turned to face him and caressed his damp cheek, surprised to discover that she was also covered in a thin sheen of sweat. He was smiling softly.

“That was amazing, love,” she said quietly.

Rytor smiled and nodded his agreement.

She wrapped her arms around him again. “Stay with me tonight? Please?”

His response was to lean forward and kiss her tenderly on the lips. “I’ll never leave you, my lady. Never.”

Arica smiled as she snuggled against her love. She was still smiling when sleep soon claimed them.

VI – A QUESTION ANSWERED

It was warmer today than it had been in weeks as Arica approached the gates to the Mayor’s Manor House. She silently regretted wearing her cloak, but was too nervous to turn back and change. She was afraid that if she did, she would lose her nerve and not return to finish the purpose of her trip here.

The guards were watching her as she approached, so she tried to stand up straighter and give a regal bearing to her stride. If it had any effect on the men, she did not see it. She stopped a respectful distance from the gate and tried to prepare herself for what lie ahead.

One of the guards stepped forward and looked at her with suspicion. “State your name and business or move along, miss. This is not a public rest area.”

Slightly taken aback by the rudeness of the question, Arica held her head high and regarded the man carefully. “I am Arica Treamon, here to see Lord Varison d’Oronarico.”

The guard smirked and glanced back at his companion before regarded her again. “And do you have an appointment to see him, Arica Treamon?”

“No, I do not.”

“Then move along. He will not want to see you without an appointment.”

Arica stared at the guard as if he had spoken in a different language. “I can assure you he will want to speak with me.”

The guard now looked amused. “And why is that, miss? His wife doesn’t permit him to visit with – *entertainment* – such as you.”

She stared at the guard, contempt rising to the surface so strong it took great effort to contain it.

“I am NOT here as entertainment to Lord d’Oronarico. And your lack of respect shall be remembered. I am his daughter.”

It was hard to contain a smile upon seeing the guard’s reaction. Arica was sure it would be impossible for his eyes to get any bigger.

“My apologies, miss. Please excuse me a moment.”

He ran back to the gate and whispered something to the other guard, who now wore a look of equal shock as his partner. The first guard rushed into the gate and disappeared from sight. After a few moments, he returned with an older man at his heels. The other man had the look of a leader, and Arica assumed he was the first man’s superior officer.

The older man walked straight up to her and regarded her carefully. “I am Lieutenant Volaire. Who did you say you were again, madam?”

Arica met his stare unflinchingly. “I am Arica Treamon, daughter to Lord Varison d’Oronarico, and I am here to see my father.”

Lieutenant Volaire's face never changed. "Is that so? That seems a bit odd since Lord d'Oronarico does not have a daughter. Why don't you tell me the truth for a change before I take you into custody for trespassing?"

You expected something like this, she thought to herself. You didn't really think they would just open the gates and give you free run of the house, did you? She took a deep breath and looked the man in the eye.

"Lord d'Oronarico used to visit a village three days north of Bandar Eban along the road to Maradon. While he was there, he met my mother. I am the result of one such meeting, Lieutenant. Now may I see my father?"

The man smiled darkly at her. "I remember that village. I was with him a time or two when he passed through there. Quite a fun place as I recall. Come with me. Your *father* is quite busy preparing for a trip, but I'll see what I can do for you. Perhaps afterwards you can come by the barracks and see me. I'm sure we can come up with some way to pass the time."

He turned without waiting for a response and began walking towards the house. Scowling, Arica followed quietly.

He led her into a large room with several chairs and motioned for her to have a seat. "I'll send in a servant with something for you to drink while you wait. I'll also let

his Lordship know he has a visitor.” With a sharp military bow, he turned and left the room.

Arica sat silently, thinking of what she would say or do if he refused to see her. That had always been a possibility, but now the reality of it was staring her in the face and she had no idea of how to react if it happened.

After a few moments, a young man wearing the clothing of a servant entered the room with a goblet of mulled wine. She accepted it with a smile, and sipped at it while she waited. Half an hour or so later, the servant reappeared and bowed to her politely. “Lord d’Oronarico will see you now in his study, good mistress,” he said in an even voice.

The study was half again as large as the sitting room, with books lining the walls and a fireplace on the back wall. A table and two comfortable looking chairs sat in the center of the room. A man was resting in one of the chairs, sipping from a goblet almost identical to the one she had been offered and reading from a large, leather bound tome. His light hair was long and unruly, hanging across his eyes and trailing down his back like a river. He was of average size from what she could see, and wore expensive-looking clothing that clung to his frame perfectly. He wore no visible weapons and had an air of one who considered himself of great importance. Arica noticed a second goblet on the table near the unoccupied chair.

The man looked up as they entered, and smiled politely without bothering to get up from his seat. He closed the book and laid it on the table and gestured to the chair beside him.

“Please, madam, have a seat. That will be all for now, Siamond.”

The servant bowed respectfully and backed out of the room as Arica sat down. The chair felt even more comfortable than it looked. She tried not to notice as Lord d’Oronarico looked her over.

“So, my dear. Lieutenant Volaire tells me you claim to be my daughter by way of a harlot I had in a small nameless village in northern Arad Doman. Does that sum up the situation well enough?”

Fire burned behind Arica’s eyes, but she nodded her agreement.

Lord d’Oronarico smiled warmly. “Good! That saves us some time then. Now tell me, child, why should I believe this ludicrous claim of yours?”

Arica was not sure how well she could hold her tongue, but she tried all the same. “You should believe it because it is the truth. There is no simpler reason than that.”

He laughed quietly and set down his goblet. “True, is it? I can believe that you never knew your father, as I am familiar with the village you speak of. The fact that your mother might believe she knew as well says much for her intellect. But I am curious why you think I am the one who sired you.”

Confusion and anger crossed across Arica’s face. *It wasn’t supposed to happen this way!*

“Well, answer me dear, or are you too overcome by your shame at your heritage?”

Through clenched teeth, Arica spoke. “I learned that you were my father through my mother’s brother, Fairne Treamon. He is the one who informed me that you are my father.”

Lord d’Oronarico’s eyes darkened for a moment, then resumed their amused glare. “Ah, of course. Master Treamon. I am surprised I did not think of it sooner, after hearing your full name, dear. I suppose he would have little reason to lie, other than his dislike for me.”

Arica could not contain her feelings any longer. She had come to meet her father and now this pompous arse had the nerve to sit here and degrade her and her uncle?

“Light take your bloody game!”

She slammed her hand on the table, overturning her goblet and almost spilling his as well.

“Your position and arrogance do not impress or frighten me! All I want is a straight answer from you, you bloody arse!”

The man’s face changed. He no longer wore the amused grin, but a scowl. “You try my patience, child. What is it you want, little girl?”

“Something you obviously know to be true! For you to admit that you are my father!”

“To what end?”

“That I know the truth!”

He regarded her closely for a moment. “Why have you come here? Have you come to try and destroy me? To take me down unless I pay you off?”

Arica shook her head angrily. “No! I could care less about your position or your influence or your wealth! I came here in the hopes that I could get to know a father I

never had the chance to know growing up, but after having met you, I refuse to acknowledge you as my father, even if you are!”

She stood and started to the door when he finally spoke up.

“It’s the truth, girl. Treamon told you true. I suppose I am your father.”

Arica stopped with her hand on the door, breathing hard. Suddenly she whirled and approached him again.

“Then why all this game? Why not admit it straight out and spare both of us this bloody dance?”

The man rose from his seat and looked down at her. “Firstly, watch your language. How dare you? How dare you come into my own house and berate me? Insult *me*? You foolish little child! Did you really think I would welcome you here with open arms? Fool! Did you never stop to think there may have been a reason I never returned to your village once I learned your mother was with child? I did not want a child! And I do not want one now! You have learned your truth, little girl, so get out of my house! Get out of my city! Do not ever return here or I will send you to the headsman! GET OUT!”

He towered over her and shoved her towards the door. She looked at him icily and backed towards the exit. She turned and opened the door, then paused halfway out.

“What now,” he bellowed. “What do you want now?”

She turned and faced him again one final time. “Only to say this. I would consider it more shameful to bear the name d’Oronarico than to remember where I came from. Light take you, *Father*, you are my father no more.”

With that she rushed from the room, ignoring the insults he hurled at her back.

VII – PUTTING IT BEHIND YOU

Arica stared out the window at the people rushing home in the near dusk. Rytor sat on the bed behind her, staring at her with concern.

“You could always return to Junigan Village,” he was saying. “You could take your uncle up on his offer to stay there.”

She sighed and turned away from the window to face him. “No, Rytor. I have had enough of looking for charity. It’s time I found my own way in this world.”

He held out a hand to her, a look of understanding spreading across his features. She looked at the hand for a moment before finally taking it and allowing herself to be

led over to sit on the bed beside him. This was not his fault. He had done nothing to her save try and keep her safe. She had no right to take this out on him.

She looked up at his face, tears beginning to fall from her eyes. "I'm sorry, Rytor," she said softly. "I don't mean to be angry with you. I have no one to blame for this except myself."

The young man pulled her closer and held her in a gentle embrace. He stroked her hair as she cried against his chest. "Everything will be all right, love. I do understand. Let it all out."

It seemed like a small eternity before she raised her head and looked at him with her red-rimmed eyes. "Don't ever leave me, Rytor. Please never leave me."

He smiled and kissed the tip of her nose softly. "I won't, Arica. I promise."

She leaned back against him, taking comfort in the warmth of his embrace. Tomorrow they were leaving for Baerlon, and from there neither knew, but for right now, none of that mattered to her. She was safe in the arms of the man she loved and who loved her in return. As long as she had that, the future did not matter at all.

PART THREE

In Time of Greatest Need

I – ON THE ROAD TO DESTINY

Arica wiped the grime from her face and gazed out ahead of her. The road dust was really beginning to be an annoyance, making her wish for an inn nearby where she could stop and get a good long bath. Glancing over at her riding companion, she allowed a smile to break through as an idea came to her mind.

“What say we stop at the next pond we come to for a little swim,” she said with a smirk. “And maybe a little more than that?”

The young man riding with her blushed to the roots of his sun-light brown hair. A slow grin broke across his features as he replied. “How is it you can still manage to do that to me?”

“What did I do?” Arica asked with a look of mock innocence on her face.

Rytor shook his head and laughed quietly at the look. “Manage to still embarrass me with comments like that after all this time.”

His comment was rewarded with a very genuine smile.

“I guess you’d better get used to it in a hurry, then. You have a very long time to endure all the teasing I can manage, love.”

He smiled back. “You can say that again.”

“Look,” Arica said with a small sigh. “I feel grimy and filthy. There haven’t been a lot of chances to clean up on this trip, and I would like to be somewhat presentable when we get to your parents’ inn. If we find a pond, I would like to stop and clean up as much as I can.”

The young man regarded her carefully for a moment before responding. “All right, we can stop for a little while. But just so you can clean up – no funny business!”

Arica smiled again as she nodded her head. “Agreed. That can wait until later.”

With that, the two slipped back into a comfortable silence. As they rode, Arica was amazed yet again at the course her life had taken over the past six months. After leaving Katar, she and Rytor had continued on to Baerlon, where they now rented a house and lived together. Rytor had taken a position in the town guard, and was learning quickly how to be a soldier. Arica had managed to get a job as apprentice to a local seamstress, and was likewise doing quite well in her chosen path. Then Rytor had truly made her dreams come true. Almost a month ago now and she still remembered it like it was yesterday. How he had come home early one day with a beautiful bouquet of flowers

just for her. How he had pulled his sword and offered the hilt to her as he confessed his undying love for her. And then the moment she still could not believe had really happened – when he asked her to be his wife – to marry him!

She wasn't sure who was more surprised – herself when she accepted his proposal, or her uncle Fairne when they had stopped to tell him the news. He confessed many times how much it shocked him that she would be the first to settle down and have a family before him. At least that was what he had said out loud. Arica was pretty sure that he was more relieved that she had finally broken completely free of the “family business” than shocked at the fact she was actually getting married. He had agreed to ride up to Handor Village about a week after them – he needed time to make arrangements in Junigan Village before he could come – but swore on his life's blood that he would not miss his favorite – and only – niece's wedding day.

Still, life was not all perfection. Those rumors they had heard on the way west from Baerlon of Taraboner and Domani skirmishes all along the Almoth Plain and even as far north as they currently were certainly sounded disturbing – provided they were true. Uncle Fairne had only heard the rumors, but had no confirmation of them as of the time they had left him. Hopefully Rytor's parents knew a little more about the situation, but that would have to wait until after the big news Rytor was going to break to them.

“Love,” she began.

“Yes, my heart?”

“Are you sure I shouldn’t wait in the stables with the horses while you tell your parents about our engagement?”

The young man looked at her as if she had grown a tail.

“Of course not! They are not going to be upset with you at all. If you remember, I asked you, not the other way around. If they’re going to be mad at anyone, it will be me. But it’s pointless to think about anyway, since they won’t be mad.”

Arica sighed deeply as she turned back to the road ahead. “If you say so, dearest. I guess I’m just nervous.”

Rytor smiled at her again. “Do you trust me?”

Now it was her turn to give him a strange look. “Am I here with you? Of course I trust you!”

“Then trust me that nothing bad will happen and you can relax,” he replied. “I swear it.”

Arica smiled faintly at that and nodded, but for some reason she could not get the sinking feeling in her stomach to go away.

The sun had long since dropped behind the horizon by the time the two arrived at the gates to Handor Village. Gates was probably not a very accurate description since they were merely part of a long fence that surrounded the village, but it was a gate of sorts all the same. Arica knew from her first arrival here that there was a matching entrance on the other side of the small village, and assumed it would be manned in exactly the same manner as this one, only one guard brandishing a spear in a decidedly unthreatening stance.

She couldn't help but notice that some things had obviously changed though, as in the faint moonlight she could see the beginnings of a guard tower under construction. It hadn't been long ago that the work on it had started, but it was being done quickly since there was enough for her to be able to tell what it was. Whatever the case may be, it was enough to increase her nervousness tremendously.

As Rytor talked to the guard, Arica realized her first assessment of the village's security was wrong. She could now see three other guards standing near the construction area. She could see no spears, but by the silhouettes in the starlight she could make out swords at their sides. She was pretty sure that the extra guards were there to make the inhabitants of the village feel more secure, but it did little to accomplish that task for her.

Maybe there is something to those rumors, she thought as she watched the guards wandering around.

“Dearest,” Rytor said quietly from beside her. “We can go through as soon as you are ready.”

Arica started and then turned to him. “What - ? Oh. Yes, of course. Let’s go.”

Rytor frowned as they started towards the now-open gate. “Are you all right, my love? You seem a bit distant.”

She shook off her discomfort slightly and gave him a tight smile. “I’m fine. My nerves are just going crazy at the moment. I know, I know. I have nothing to worry about. But knowing that here –,” she said as she pointed at her heart, “does nothing to soothe me here.” With the last, she moved her hand to point at her head.

The frown slowly faded from Rytor’s face as he considered what she said. “Fair enough,” he responded after a moment. “You just manage to worry me more often than I like.”

This time her smile was much more genuine. “Starting to regret getting hooked up with a Domani woman?”

He looked aghast as he replied quickly, “No! Of course not!” He relaxed a little more and softened his voice as he returned the smile. “I just wasn’t sure what I was getting into. It takes a bit of getting used to.”

Arica moved her horse closer to his as they continued to his parent’s inn in a comfortable silence.

The fire burning in the hearth of the inn’s common room provided the only light as the couple entered. As Arica’s eyes began to adjust to the slight brightness in the room, she noticed two people rising from their seats near the fire. Rytor’s mother Allyna was the first to actually speak, a fact that did not surprise her in the least.

“Good evening! Is there something I can...? Rytor? Is that really you?”

With that the woman crossed the room quickly and wrapped her son in a massive hug. Rytor struggled to break free as she showered him with kisses. Arica could not help but smile at the display of affection from a mother to her son, and vaguely wished she had felt the same when she was with her own mother.

As Rytor's father Tomar approached, the older woman stepped back and giving Rytor one last look of affection shifted her gaze to Arica. Her smile grew larger as recognition crossed her face. Nodding once, she started towards the young woman.

"And you, Miss Arica," she said as she embraced the girl with only slightly less enthusiasm as she had bestowed upon her son. "It is good to see you as well. Was your trip productive? It must have been for you to have kept Rytor away for so long."

With that the woman stepped back, obviously waiting for Arica's response. The younger woman took a deep breath as she decided what to say to Allyna. The older woman saved her from the trouble before she had managed to formulate a response though.

"Never mind that," Allyna began. "You can tell me whenever you feel comfortable doing so. You will be staying for a while, won't you?"

Rytor stepped up to them and answered his mother. "Yes, Mother, we are staying for a few days anyway."

Tomar smiled at the comment, knowing that it would not slip past his wife. Arica caught it as well and braced herself for the blast. While Tomar was not disappointed by the reaction, Arica was mildly surprised.

“I believe I heard you say ‘we’, Rytor,” the woman said as she turned towards her son. “Let’s all go sit down by the fire. It seems we have something to discuss.”

Without waiting for a response, she turned and headed back to her seat by the hearth, stopping to grab a couple of extra cups to go with the pot of tea on the table. Rytor’s face paled slightly as he extended a hand to Arica. Before she could take it, Tomar stepped up and addressed his son.

“Go ahead and join your mother. I’ll escort your lady to her seat.”

Rytor gave his father a strange look and then nodded and wandered over to the table. Arica had not missed the way the older man had addressed her and tensed even more than before. Once again, she was pleasantly surprised.

“I wanted to apologize to you in a bit of privacy,” he began slowly. “Not a day has gone by that my wife has not reminded me how rudely I treated you the first time you were here. I realize that being quite drunk was no excuse, but it’s the only one I have to offer you. I do sincerely hope you will find it in your heart to forgive me for that.”

Arica looked at him closely and had no trouble seeing how sincere the man was in what he was saying. She felt she had no choice, really.

“Of course I forgive you. All you had to do was ask me,” she replied.

The man relaxed visibly. “Thank you,” he said. “I am glad you forgive me. Especially under the current circumstances.”

He added a wink to the last that set Arica’s stomach fluttering again, even stronger than before.

“What - ,” she began.

Tomar waved her off. “He told me a little, but not all he wants to I think. Let’s join the others so I can hear the whole story.”

Slowly, Arica followed him to the table where Rytor and his mother were sitting. Rytor seemed to be studying a point on the floor with great intensity, while Allyna kept looking at him expectantly. Evidently, she was ready for an answer whether or not Arica and Tomar were at the table.

Arica took her seat next to Rytor and took his hand as he extended it to her. Taking a deep breath, she glanced at him and nodded at his questioning expression. Rytor visibly steadied himself, and then looked up at his parents.

“I’m not sure where to begin,” he said. “So I will just come out with the important part. Arica and I have grown very close as we have journeyed together for these past few months. We have made a commitment to each other and have fallen in love.”

As he took a breath to continue - and to tell the biggest part of the news, Arica glanced at Allyna. She looked ready to say something even now, but the gentle touch of Tomar’s hand on her arm seemed to stop her – at least for the moment. She took another deep breath of her own, not realizing until Rytor began to speak again that she was holding it.

“Arica and I have begun a life together in Baerlon,” he continued. “And we have come here to be married before continuing with that life. As we both feel is right, we have come to ask your blessing on our marriage.”

At least that part is done, Arica thought. Now for the yelling to start. Cautiously, she looked at the older couple to find out what their reactions were so far.

Tomar was smiling broadly and trying to insure his wife didn’t see it. *At least he’s approving of it,* she thought with slight relief. Then she looked at Allyna. The older woman didn’t look mad at least. In fact, she was studying her and Rytor with a very neutral expression on her broad features. Finally, she spoke.

“Are you sure about this? Absolutely sure?”

Since the question seemed directed at both of them, Arica responded first. “Yes ma’am. I have never felt for anyone the way I do for Rytor. I would consider it an honor to be his wife.”

Rytor smiled slightly at Arica before answering himself. “Mother, I have never been surer of anything in my life.”

Allyna considered the two of them for a moment longer before addressing her husband. “Tomar, what do you think about all this? As if I couldn’t already guess by that smile on your face.”

The man’s smile widened. “My heart, if they are sure, and truly in love as they say, who are we to interfere with the way the Wheel has turned?”

Arica realized again she was holding her breath as she waited for Allyna’s response. Just as she was releasing it, the older woman nodded and turned back to face them again and she ended up holding the next breath she took as well.

“I agree with my husband, amazingly enough. He may not know the most about keeping an inn, but he does know romance. As long as the two of you are sure about this?”

The young couple nodded enthusiastically, nearly in unison.

A smile began slowly creeping across her face as she spoke again. “Then speaking for your father and myself, Rytor, you have our blessings. Mistress Arica, I shall address you as such no longer. Welcome to our family, daughter.”

Arica was relieved that she was now able to relax considerably from when she had first come into the common room. Once Allyna had welcomed her into their family, the gathering degenerated into another round of embraces and affection. Allyna and Tomar extended their congratulations to the younger couple more times than Arica could remember, and Allyna insisted that she accompany her the next day to make preparations and get to know one another better.

Now they were all seated around the fire again, the pot of tea nearly empty and the conversation winding down before going to bed. Rytor managed to be the one to ask about the other thing that had been bothering Arica before she had managed to build up the nerve.

“Tell me, Father,” he began. “Who are the new guards at the village gates? Do they have anything to do with those rumors about Tarabon and Arad Doman skirmishes in this area?”

Tomar considered the question for a moment before responding. “I guess since you are here after being on your own for a bit and about to get married, there is no way to pretend you are still a child instead of the man I see before me. As such, there’s no reason to keep such things from you. The rumors are not just rumors. A Taraboner raiding party attacked us nearly a week ago, and there is a great fear that they may come back again.”

The room was suddenly dead silent except for the sharp hiss of Arica’s nervous intake of air. *True*, her mind screamed at her. *The rumors are true!* Her thoughts went immediately to uncle Fairne. As Captain of the village guard, he would have no choice but to fight. But he had not heard the truth of these rumors yet, at least he hadn’t a few days ago.

Arica shook off her thoughts as she realized Tomar was starting to speak again.

“Apparently the fighting has gotten pretty bad in some places,” the older man was saying. “Bad enough that King Almadar and the Council of Merchants have dispatched groups of the King’s Guard to all of the villages and hamlets between Katar and Bandar Eban. Those that are here arrived about four days ago and immediately began taking command of the village guard. Not that many people were fighting the change, mind you. Most of them were more than happy to be told what to do when dealing with something a little more dangerous than a simple pie theft or a brawl in the streets when men have had too much drink. First order of business after taking command – a feat that took all of ten minutes, most of that just messengers running to tell the gate guards about it – was to

start construction on guard towers near the gates. Once they finish with that, they plan to build wall around the village. Walls! Can you imagine? As if we were in Caemlyn or Tear or some such place instead of simple Handor Village!”

Rytor sat quietly for several moments after his father finished speaking. Finally, he spoke up to ask the inevitable questions.

“How bad was the attack on the village, Father?”

Allyna was the one who answered. “Bad enough. Old man Dontier was killed – they burned his farm to the ground while he was still sound asleep in bed. Poor old fool never even woke up, best we can figure. Only four or five of the village guards were killed, though there were considerably more that were wounded pretty badly. The King’s Guard has asked that any man able to wield a sword come forward to train and help in the defense of the village should this ever happen again. Considering the way they’re acting, I’d say it’s pretty evident they are expecting just that.”

Arica realized suddenly that her heart seemed to have crawled up into her throat. Somehow, she knew exactly what Rytor was going to say before the words had even left his mouth. Much to her dread, her guess was correct.

“Then tomorrow I will present myself to the King’s Guard,” he said. “Arica and I will remain here until the worst of the fighting is over, then we shall return to our home.”

Tomar glanced at Arica before replying. He didn't miss the look of anger that was beginning to redden her cheeks. "That may well be, son. That may well be." He placed a hand on his wife's arm. "My dear, I believe we should retire for the night. I suspect these two need a bit of privacy for now."

The older woman looked from Rytor to Arica and back again before finally nodding. "I think you are right about that, my love. Rytor, your room has been untouched since you left. It should be adequate for yourself and Arica, even though I would prefer you stayed in separate rooms until things are well and proper. We shall see you both in the morning for breakfast. Arica, I look forward to our day together as well."

With that, the two stood and made their way through the kitchen to where their bedroom was, leaving Rytor and Arica behind.

Arica could feel the heat in her face from the anger that was continuing to rise. Her tongue ached to lash out at Rytor, but she bit her lip and forced herself to remain silent until she was sure she would not regret the words that came out of her mouth. To her amazement, Rytor seemed to be oblivious to the fury that was sitting next to him.

The young man stood and extended his hand to her with a smile. "That wasn't so bad, was it? I guess we should turn in as well. Tomorrow will be a long day."

Arica did not move an inch from her current position except to cross her arms over her chest.

Slowly, Rytor let his hand drop, a confused look coming to his face. “Arica? My heart? What is it?”

Arica looked up at him and frowned. After a moment, she shook her head and went back to staring straight ahead.

With a good bit of trepidation, Rytor resumed his previous seat and looked at Arica questioningly. “Is – is something wrong? Did I – I mean, was it something I said – or did – or...?”

The young woman could control her tongue no longer. “What is bloody wrong with you? Are we together or not?”

Rytor looked as if he had been slapped. “What - ?”

“Don’t act like such a Light-blinded fool,” she snapped. “You are not that daft.”

A slight flush crept into Rytor’s features. “Is this because I agreed to stay and defend the village? Light, Arica! This is my *home*! I grew up here! Of course I want to help defend it from - .”

Arica cut him off. “Do you really think I am that bloody callous? Blood and ashes! I *know* this is your home and I fully *expected* you to want to stay to defend it if need be.”

Rytor’s budding anger drained away in a heartbeat and confusion returned, stronger than before. “Then what - ?”

With a sigh of exasperation, Arica snapped out what was bothering her. “You never bothered to *ask* me before offering that decision! Do you not think that my soon-to-be husband risking his life is something I should be allowed *some* input into? I would have liked a chance to discuss this in private *before* you offered that commitment to your parents!”

The young man looked as if he had been flogged. “Arica, I – I’m sorry. I don’t know what else to say. You’re right. I should have taken the time to discuss my intent with you before making it a reality. Can you forgive me?”

“Possibly,” she responded. “But we are going to discuss this first before I make that decision.”

She turned and looked him in the eye. “You know how I feel about you, Rytor. I can’t bear to watch you die like I did - .”

“Like you watched Moria,” he finished for her.

Arica nodded in response. “Yes, like I watched Moria. I cannot bear to go through that again. I will *not* go through that again. But,” she said, cutting him off with a raised finger before he could reply. “I understand the devotion and dedication to duty you feel. I know that nothing I can say or do will change your mind about staying to defend Handor Village if the need arises. So here is what I will do, and this is my final say on the matter. I will support your decision to stay to defend your home village. I will stay with you, until the dangers have passed so we can return home. And I will only do this provided we continue with our plans to be married in four days. I will *not* stand by and watch you die, or let you die in my arms this soon. I want a lifetime with you, not a couple of weeks. Can you accept those terms? If not, tell me now, before it’s too late.”

After a moment, Rytor slowly nodded his head. “Yes, I can accept that. I love you, Arica, and I do not want to lose you. I swear I will not die on you before we get our lifetime together.”

“I love you, too, Rytor, but I have a funny feeling you’re a liar,” she responded with a slight smile. “But that’s okay for now. Just don’t be surprised if I do my damndest to hold you to that oath.”

Relieved, the young man smiled back at her. “I think I’d be disappointed if you didn’t.”

Smiling wider, Arica stood and crossed to sit on Rytor’s lap. “Then you are forgiven.”

Leaning down, she kissed him softly and ran her hands through his hair. As she broke the kiss, she grinned at him mischievously.

“You know,” she said slyly. “That pond was horrid for bathing. The water was too cold. How about showing me how sorry you are by cleaning me up a bit. Afterwards, maybe we can both have a little fun by getting each other dirty again.”

Laughing and blushing heavily, Rytor picked her up in his arms and carried her towards the bathing rooms.

III – PREPARATIONS AND BONDINGS

Arica and Allyna were laughing together as they left the residence of the village mayor. The man had been overjoyed at the prospect of performing a wedding in a few days, expressing his hopes that the event would help to take the villagers’ minds off of the disparate situation that had permeated them since the Taraboner attack. The two women had no trouble figuring out that the man was counting on almost as large an affair

as Allyna was actually planning for. They had spent some time talking and joking before leaving, and Arica found herself in better spirits than she had been in since before her arrival with Rytor the night before.

As they made their way to the seamstress to make arrangements for a wedding dress for Arica, Allyna told her all about how she and Tomar had grown up together in Four Kings. She told her how the young Tomar had come to her late one night and asked her to run away with him. The older woman laughed at the memory of Tomar's mother chasing the man around their farm with a very large switch once the two of them had returned and informed their parents that they had gotten married. She told Arica how they had decided to see a bit of the world before settling down somewhere. Arica learned about Rytor's birth on a small boat near Whitebridge after Allyna and Tomar were returning from a romantic trip down the river. Allyna was just finishing the story of how they had decided to come here and take over the village inn from its ailing previous owner when they arrived at the seamstress's home.

The seamstress was an elderly lady, small and frail, but extremely cordial. The old woman's eyes were still full of life, and she fawned over Arica like she had found her long-lost granddaughter. Allyna stood by smiling as the lady carried on a friendly argument with Arica over the nature and design of the dress. Arica wanted a typical Domani style – a dress that left little to the imagination while still causing the viewer to imagine quite a bit – while the seamstress wanted her to have a dress of a more conservative cut with a high neck and a loose fit. They finally reached a compromise and

agreed on a dress that would be very form fitting, but opaque and high-necked. The seamstress insisted on a white dress and would not budge on that point, despite Arica's arguments that she would prefer off-white or even a rich blue color. Seeing that there would be no compromise here, Arica finally relented and allowed the woman to make a pure white dress, as long as it could be trimmed in off-white. The seamstress smiled and agreed to make all the lace off-white. Allyna laughed harder at Arica's reaction to the mention of lace, then paid the seamstress and bundled Arica out before she could protest.

The two women had slipped into a comfortable silence as they made their way to the village market to make preparations for all of the meals and drink that the wedding celebration would require. Arica looked at Allyna thoughtfully for a moment before asking a question.

"Allyna – I mean Mother," she corrected as the older woman gave her a look. "Has anyone come through here looking for me since I left?"

Allyna thought for a moment before answering. "No, dear, no one has that I can remember. Why do you ask?"

Arica sighed and shook her head. "It's not important."

With an exasperated sound, Allyna pulled Arica over to a bench near the side of the wide street and sat her down before joining her.

“Look, Arica,” she began. “Your past is your business and none of mine, but I am tired of feeling like you are walking on embers barefoot around me with it. If you don’t want to talk about it, that is fine and I can respect that. But you *will* stop acting like you think I would strap your hide off if I knew it! I have already told you that you are now my daughter since you will be marrying my son. I am already coming to love you as one, and nothing you could say or do will change that feeling. Do I make myself clear, young lady?”

Stunned, Arica could do nothing but nod silently.

Seeing the response, Allyna smiled. “Good. Now I suggest we rest here for a moment before we continue. I am nowhere near as young as I used to be and my legs are already starting to ache.”

Arica’s mind spun as she sat with her soon-to-be mother-in-law. She considered what the woman had said to her and finally came to a decision.

“Mother,” she said, mildly proud that she had managed to address her properly the first time for a change. “I’m sorry. I have been acting that way whenever my past came up. I should have known you wouldn’t judge me for it, but it’s hard to accept since I still judge myself for it.”

The older woman looked at her evenly. “You are forgiven, child. You know that already. If you’d like to talk about it, I am more than willing to listen.”

Taking a deep breath, Arica steadied herself for what she was about to say. This would not be easy.

“I was running away from home because I had killed a man in my home village.”

There. It was finally out. She glanced up at Allyna, hoping she would not see fear or worse disgust on the woman’s face. She was relieved to see only an expectant and patient look as Allyna waited to hear the rest.

“His name was Lord Draven, though I doubt anyone there could tell you where he was Lord of. He was a soldier, and he had come to my village looking for a bit of ‘relaxation’. That’s really all my village was known for or good for. Even I was in line to continue in the ‘family business’. Not that I really wanted to, but I didn’t feel I had much choice. None of us did.

But Lord Draven was different from all the rest. He was cold and calculating – and sick if you ask me. He developed an ‘interest’ in my best friend Moria. She was a couple of years younger than me – not yet old enough to be selected for the soldier’s fun. She looked a lot like me, and many people who came in always thought we were sisters. I guess she and I even forgot we weren’t at times. We were very close. Draven was always

kind to her. He always brought her presents and sat her on his knee to tell her stories of all his soldiering in Saldea. I think that he was from the Borderlands himself, but I never heard for sure.

He even picked me one night because he thought I *was* Moria's sister. That should be a clue right there. But I'm rambling. One night after he arrived, Moria came to my rooms. She was bleeding badly – it was obvious he had hurt her. It was also obvious that – that – that he didn't stop once she started bleeding. He abused her in ways I can – can – he – she – “

Arica choked back a sob and put her face in her hands, startled to find tears streaming down her cheeks. The pain of Moria's death, the sickly sound of her voice that night came rushing back, tearing apart every wall and defense she had erected to protect herself from those memories.

Dimly, she felt an arm around her shoulders and allowed herself to be pulled into Allyna's breast. The older woman held her there and stroked her hair as the pain inside tore at her mind.

“Shh, let it out child. I believe I can get the picture. You don't need to tear yourself up by reliving it all. Let it out, and if you don't want to continue, believe me, I will understand.”

“N-no,” Arica choked out between her sobs. “I h-h-have to finish. May-maybe not so you-you you know, but for m-m-me.”

“Then finish whenever you’re ready, dear. I’m not going anywhere.”

The tears lasted only for a few more moments before subsiding into a few scattered snuffles. Slowly, Arica pulled away from Allyna and wiped first her eyes and then her nose on the sleeve of her dress. “Thank you,” she whispered.

Allyna smiled at the younger woman. “No need to thank me, dear. But you are most welcome.”

Arica took another deep breath and continued. “Later that night, after Moria had – died, I went to Lord Draven’s rooms as if I wanted to pleasure him. He accepted quickly, and I killed him. I stuck a knife into his face and killed him.”

“Why not just go to the local constabulary? I’m sure they would have helped,” Allyna asked quietly.

“Moria’s mother asked me the same thing after I told her,” Arica responded with a mirthless laugh. “Think about it – if you were a village constable and a whore told you that a noble warrior had killed another future whore would *you* do anything?”

The older woman was a bit taken aback by the harsh way Arica had described herself and her friend, but she did understand her point. And the description she had used was probably the way most of the constables would have viewed it as well. “So you ran,” she said.

“Yes,” Arica replied. “I ran. If I had been caught, I would not have seen the end of that week before I was hung.

A week after I left, you met me here. I was terrified you already knew and had alerted Draven’s men back home. Then you offered to send Rytor with me, and the terror turned into confusion.”

Arica looked Allyna in the eye. “Considering we’re preparing for my wedding to Rytor, I suppose I should thank you.”

With a laugh, Allyna shook her head. “Oh, no. Don’t thank me! Once I told Rytor there was a damsel in distress, he was on his feet with his sword on his hip before I could say any more. That boy has heard too many gleemen’s tales living in this inn not to jump at the chance to live one himself.”

The young woman smiled back. “I guess you’re right about that. He does seem to be a bit too ready to jump into an adventure.”

Allyna calmed her merriment and asked “And your uncle – did you manage to find him?”

“We did find Uncle Fairne in Junigan Village, just as I was hoping. He’ll be here in another couple of days, in fact – for the wedding. He put us up for the night and offered to let me stay with him after he heard why I was there, but he also gave me the information I needed for the other journey I felt I needed to make – to find my father.”

“Rytor did mention that in the letter he sent back from there, but he didn’t say much else. Did you find him? Did meeting with him go well?”

“My father and that stuff that comes out of a horse’s arse bear a striking resemblance to each other,” Arica growled before catching herself. “Actually, most horses probably have better manners than he does. Suffice it to say he was not at all what I had expected.”

The older woman blanched at the tone and insult to the girl’s own father. “I’m sorry, Arica. But at least things seem to have gone well after that. And now you shall have a proper family as well.”

She was rewarded with a half-hearted smile. “Yes, but no matter how hard you try you will never be my flesh and blood. The only real family I have in that respect is Uncle Fairne. I guess he will have to be enough.”

They sat in silence for a while, just enjoying the other's company. Finally, Allyna stood up and held out her hand to Arica. "We should be off. If we hurry, we can probably see Rytor practicing with the King's Guard on the way to the market."

With a genuine smile, Arica took the hand and stood as well. "Then let's hurry. A woman always needs a good chance to laugh at her future husband."

Allyna returned the smile and winked as she added "That need is still there, even after you've been married to him for several seasons."

The two women laughed together and continued on, hand in hand.

As promised, Rytor was training with the King's Guard as they passed the barracks. He was shirtless and covered with sweat as he faced off against another man in a similar state. Both held long reeds lashed together as a practice sword. They seemed to each be giving and getting their fair share of hits with the reeds, judging from the red welts that covered both their torsos.

At Allyna's suggestion, Arica wandered over to lean on the fence surrounding the barracks while the older woman took care of their business at the market. After watching the two men strike and block with each other, she managed to catch Rytor's eye as he

circled his opponent. The young man gave her a quick smile and nod before blocking a particularly nasty strike towards his chest.

Smiling to herself, Arica decided to have a little fun of her own. Glancing around to make sure no one was watching or looking at her other than Rytor, she began slowly unbuttoning the top of her dress and running her hands across her breasts under the fabric. She almost laughed out loud as she saw his eyes widen in shock. He had just begun to blush when his opponent's practice sword caught him across the forehead and knocked him flat on his back. As he sat up holding his head, Arica turned away quickly and did the buttons back up on her dress. She was no longer bothering to hold in the laughter.

She met Allyna as she was coming out of the market. The older woman was smiling; obviously pleased with the deal she had worked out. Allyna stopped as she saw Arica approaching.

“Well, that's taken care of. Now we can – what's so funny? Did I miss something?”

IV – FAIRNE'S ARRIVAL

The sun was barely up as Arica sat down to breakfast. The days had flown by since she and Rytor had arrived, and now they were nearly to the day she was waiting for.

Tomorrow at midday, she and Rytor would stand in the village square and become man and wife. She and Allyna had gone the day before to pick up the wedding dress from the seamstress, and she had to admit it was beautiful – even if it wasn't exactly what she had wanted. But that mattered little to her now, as she would not trade the dress for anything in the world. Rytor had begged to see it, but she had refused, telling him it was bad luck to see the dress before she wore it at their wedding. He finally relented and she smiled as she imagined his face when he saw the dress on her.

He was sitting next to her this morning, engaged in conversation with his father about some inn-related something or another, barely pausing in his dissertation long enough to take a bite from his sweet bread or a spoonful of egg or ham. Her own meal was much the same – an egg, a slice of ham, a slice of sweet bread covered in honey, and a cup of hot tea to drink. She spared herself one more glance at the love of her life before settling in to eat.

The door to the inn flew open with a bang, making her jump and catching the two men's attention as well. A middle-aged man stepped through, dressed in the uniform of the captain of a village guard.

Arica was on her feet at once, nearly overturning the table in her enthusiasm to reach the man.

“Uncle Fairne,” she cried as she raced towards him. “You finally made it!”

Fairne paused and bent slightly to grab the young girl in an embrace that swept her off her feet. “Of course I did, Ari! Did you think I wouldn’t come?”

She returned the hug and let herself be held, feet dangling. “I knew you’d be here. We were just expecting you yesterday.”

“I was running a bit late,” he confessed as he set her down again and started towards her table. “I got in too long past dark last night and stayed at the barracks.”

Rytor had already risen and was coming to meet them. He smiled broadly as he extended his hand to the older man. “Welcome to Handor Village, Fairne. I’m glad to see you are well after your trip.”

Fairne returned the smile as he accepted the hand and shook it vigorously. “You too, lad. And thank you for the welcome.”

He turned his attention to Rytor’s father and offered a hand to him as well. “You must be this fine lad’s father. I am Captain Fairne Treamon, Commander of Junigan Village Guard and uncle to this wildcat your son has decided to marry.”

Tomar smiled and shook the proffered hand. “I am Tomar al’Monar, Rytor’s father. I am pleased to finally meet you after hearing so much about you.”

Fairne laughed heartily. “Knowing this girl, most was probably not true nor very good.”

The other man laughed as well as he replied “No, no, it was all good, I assure you.”

The Captain turned as he heard footsteps approaching and regarded Allyna for a moment. “And who is this lovely lady?”

Much to Arica’s surprise, Allyna actually blushed before extending her hand. “I am Allyna, Rytor’s mother.”

With a flourish and a deep bow, Fairne took her and kissed it gently before responding. “Madam Allyna, it is a great pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

Arice didn’t think it was possible, but Rytor’s mother blushed even deeper. *Well*, she thought. *Uncle Fairne always did have the legendary Domani charm.*

The group sat down again as Allyna rushed to the kitchen to get a plate for Fairne, despite his protests that he was not hungry. Once she returned, she set the serving girls about their chores and duties and joined the rest of the family.

Conversation during breakfast was light-hearted, with Fairne telling stories of Arica's adventures when she was a child and Rytor's parents doing likewise for him. Once they had finished their meal and thoroughly embarrassed the young couple, Fairne and Tomar leaned back in their chairs and lit up pipes as one of the serving girls cleared the table.

"Tell me, Captain," Tomar began. "What word have you of these Taraboner attacks."

Fairne shook his head. "Not much, really. A troop of the King's Guard arrived just before I left. They had orders to assist the commander of the guard in preparing a defense for the village in the event of one of the attacks, but there hasn't been an attack there that I am aware of." The man snorted before continuing. "Silly fools. They did their best to pick apart the defenses I already had in place for protection against bandit raids, but fared poorly at the task. I think they were actually glad I was leaving so I wouldn't step on all their plans."

The other man smiled and nodded. "A troop showed up here as well. We did have an attack, but they got here after it. Of course, our guardsmen could use the help creating a defense here. And I have to say they've done a pretty good job so far."

"Maybe you could stay here and help our guards out for a time," Rytor added. "The King's Guard that are here would welcome experienced help, I'm sure."

“My men know to carry out my orders, and my Lieutenant will lead them well in my absence,” Fairne responded. “One of the King’s Guards asked me that very thing last night. I may do well to consider it. But now,” he said, rising from his seat and stretching. “We have your impending prison sentence – I mean wedding to contend with.”

Placing a hand on Arica’s shoulder, he winked at the younger man. “Of course, if you’re marrying this one you might do well to be trained to withstand any possible assault.”

Even Arica herself had to join in with the laughter – after playfully punching her uncle in the stomach, of course.

V – DIRE MOMENTS

Arica awoke suddenly to the sounds of shouting and the metallic crashing of steel against steel. Sitting up, she tried to reorient herself after being jerked out of sleep in such a manner while wiping her eyes with one hand and reaching for Rytor with the other. She found him sitting on the edge of their bed pulling his boots on. Realizing what that must mean, she came fully awake with a start.

“Taraboners?” she asked simply.

Rytor nodded and continued getting dressed.

“You’re going to fight, aren’t you?”

He nodded again as he stood and reached for his sword.

Arica got out of bed and crossed the room to stand in front of him, forcing him to look at her. “Rytor, we’re getting married tomorrow. Can’t you leave this to the others, just this once?”

The young man sighed as he finished strapping the sword to his belt. “You know I can’t do that, Arica.”

She waited for a moment before reaching for her own clothes and pulling them on rapidly. “Then I’m going with you.”

“Blood and bloody ashes you bloody are bloody not!”

Arica was so stunned that he had actually sworn that she stopped dressing and stared at him as if he had gone mad. He moved in front of her and put his hands on her shoulders.

“I love you, Arica,” he said, looking deep into her eyes. “But I’ll not let you risk your life in this as well.”

He reached into his pack and pulled out a jeweled signet ring. Turning back to her, he took her hand and pressed the ring into it.

“This is my family’s signet,” he explained. “You are part of my family now. I don’t need some fancy ceremony to feel that. This ring is yours now as much as it is mine. So I want you to have it.”

Arica looked down at the ring in her hand, her mind racing. “Wait just one bloody minute! You act like you’re not coming back from this!”

Rytor smiled faintly and shook his head. “Oh, I have every intention of coming back. But my father always did say to be prepared for anything. That’s what I’m doing now – being prepared for anything.”

The young woman nodded and curled her hand over the ring. “Be that as it may, I am still going with you. How else am I supposed to make you keep that oath?”

Her husband-to-be threw up his hands in frustration. “Light, Arica! Will you ever listen to what I tell you to do?”

She laughed as she answered. “Of course, just not right now.”

“Don’t do this to me, Arica.”

Turning on him ferociously, she spat back “You don’t do this to *me*, Rytor!”

A knock at the door interrupted the argument. Fairne stuck his head in without waiting for an invitation and quickly found Rytor with his eyes. “Come on, boy! You’re needed out there now, not next week!” He glanced at Arica and gave her a strange look before ducking back out and shutting the door.

Rytor headed the way Fairne had gone and called back over his shoulder “We’ll finish this discussion later, Arica. I love you, now and forever.”

With that, he raced down the hall, ignoring her yells for him to stop and come back.

Arica burst through the door that lead to the innkeeper’s family’s rooms and into the common room. Before she could make it to the door to the outside, Allyna stepped in front of her and grabbed her arms.

“You’re not going out there, child,” she said sternly. “So don’t even think of fighting me on this. I am not afraid to bend you over my knee and switch your bottom but good!”

Struggling to break free of the older woman’s iron grip, Arica cried out “But Rytor – “

“Is a grown man who can take care of himself, dear,” Allyna finished for her, cutting her off. “Now stop wiggling around like that and calm down!”

Realizing it was a pointless struggle, Arica relaxed and stood still, looking at the older woman. Allyna finally released her, then reached behind her and thrust a spear into Arica’s hands.

Arica looked at the spear in confusion for a moment before looking to Allyna for an explanation.

“What *we* are going to do, my daughter, is sit ourselves by that fire and tear apart any Taraboner fool who decides to step through that door.”

Knowing there was no budging her future mother-in-law when she put her foot down like this, Arica reluctantly nodded her head and walked over to a table next to the fire, carrying the spear she had been handed in one hand. After making sure she had gone

to sit down, the older woman joined her, and the two settled in to wait out the battle, both praying that their loved ones would be all right. Arica couldn't help but notice that she had a very sick feeling in her stomach, as if she knew that her prayers were being ignored.

It had been almost two hours since the fighting outside started before Arica and Allyna first noticed that it had gotten considerably quieter. Where before they heard shouting and swords clashing, they now heard voices speaking in a normal tone of voice. Allyna leaned over and peered out one of the windows in the common room. Most of them had lost their glass as objects and once a person had come flying through them. The man who came through the front window had gotten up and run right back outside before either of the two women had a chance to determine which side he was on.

After a moment, Allyna sat back down and looked at Arica. "It looks like it's over, but I can't be sure. They may have just moved further towards the other side of the village."

Arica nodded and tightened her grip on the spear. She wanted to rush outside and find Rytor, but she knew better than to try and leave before Allyna was sure it was safe to do so. The older woman had jumped every time she so much as shifted in her seat. The serving girl who had brought them a fresh pitcher of tea had almost gotten a spear

through her chest for the effort, simply because she had come up when Allyna was looking the other way.

With a loud crash, the front door flew open and Fairne stepped through carrying an unconscious body. He was covered in blood and had a massive scrape along his left temple. His face was covered in sweat and gore as he came slowly into the inn.

As he came closer, Arica was able to recognize the person he was carrying. “Rytor, oh Light, no,” she whispered, her blood turning to ice.

Allyna was on her feet in an instant, rushing towards the two men. Arica was only a bare moment behind her, dropping her spear to the floor and crossing the room before she had risen fully from her sitting position.

“What happened?” Allyna demanded worriedly. “Where’s Tomar?”

“He – he’s fine,” Fairne forced out breathlessly. “He’s gone for the Wisdom. Help me get Rytor to his bed. I don’t think I can hold him much longer.”

The two women helped Fairne carry Rytor back to the room he and Arica shared and lay him on his bed. Allyna pulled off his boots and pulled his covers over him, barely concealing the moan that escaped her lips as she noticed the gaping wound in his chest. The white sheets turned red almost immediately after touching it.

“What happened to him, Uncle?” Arica asked quietly as Fairne collapsed into the nearest chair. “Please tell me what happened.”

The man took a deep breath and winced. Arica glanced down and noticed blood seeping from a gash in his side. She was about to comment on it when he answered her.

“He – got run through, from what I could see,” he said with an obvious effort. “I grabbed him as soon as – as the fighting stopped and - and carried him back h-here. I passed T-T-Tomar on the w-way and sent him for the w-w-w-Wisdom.”

Arica knelt in front of him and reached for his side. “Uncle, you’re hurt.”

He waved her off with a weak gesture. “Not as bad as it looks. But I could sleep for an age.”

The girl tried to swallow the lump that had formed in her throat and asked “Will he live, Uncle?”

Fairne looked at her evenly for a moment before answering. “I honestly couldn’t say, Ari. Best wait for the Wisdom.”

Deciding not to argue the point at the moment since her uncle needed to rest, Arica simply nodded before walking over to the bed and kneeling beside it. She reached out with a shaking hand and brushed Rytor's hair away from his eyes before taking his limp hand in hers and resting her head next to his.

“Hold on my sweet, brave Rytor,” she said quietly. “Please hold on.”

VI – MIRACLES UNKNOWN

The Wisdom pushed Arica out of her way for what seemed like the hundredth time. She gave the girl an angry look as she made her way closer to Rytor so she could examine the boy again. Arica gave her a look of her own once the woman turned her back to her.

Okay, she needs room to work to try and help him, Arica thought angrily. But if she calls me ‘little girl’ one more time, I’m going to scream.

The woman – Darania, if Arica could remember the name Allyna had called her correctly – had come in and immediately set to work cleaning and bandaging Rytor's wounds. She didn't seem to care that Arica had already taken his shirt off and cleaned the wound as best she could, but the young girl really didn't care as long as the healer actually did what her name implied.

Darania finished her examination and stood up shaking her head. As she noticed Arica's expectant look, she frowned deeper and growled "Go ahead, I've done all I can do for now."

Arica gave her a look that could have turned rivers to ice and moved back beside her love. Her eyes narrowed as she noticed the Wisdom turn her back and begin whispering to Fairne and Rytor's parents. Arica strained to hear what was being said, but couldn't make out the words. Then again, with Tomar and Allyna's faces, she didn't really need to hear to get the idea of what was being said. The paler Allyna's face became, the further Arica's stomach dropped. When Allyna put her hands over her face and turned to allow her husband to embrace her, Arica felt her stomach hit her boots. Even as Fairne nodded at something the Wisdom said just before she rushed the older couple out of the room, Arica knew what was coming.

Fairne walked slowly over to where Arica sat beside the bed. Easing down into a squatting position next to her with only a hint of a wince, he reached out and placed a hand on Arica's back.

"Ari," he began slowly. "I need to talk to you."

A single tear escaped her eye as she turned to face him. "I thought you might," she replied, relieved that her voice had not cracked as she said it.

Her uncle nodded his head once and looked her in the eyes. “Darania treated Rytor’s wound as best she could, but there really wasn’t a whole lot that could have been done.”

Her lip trembling as she waited to hear the inevitable, Arica put on the bravest face she could manage at the moment. “And?”

The older man sighed heavily and shook his head. “I don’t know how to say it, Arica, so I’ll just say it as it is. He’s not going to make it. That Wisdom says she would be surprised if he even makes it the rest of the night.”

Arica’s head dropped as the tears began to flow more freely than before. Even knowing what he was going to say had not made hearing it any easier. As she turned back to look at Rytor’s sweating face, she was dimly aware that her uncle was still speaking.

“I know you want a moment alone with him, so we are going to give you that. All of us will be in the common room when you’re ready to join us. I also want you to know that I plan to stick around here with you for a few days. Once you’re ready, I’ll escort you wherever you want to go. If you need to take care of things in Baerlon, I’ll take you there. You are also more than welcome to come stay with me in Junigan. You don’t have to decide now; just let me know when you do decide. I’ll be in the other room if you need me.”

With a final squeeze of her shoulder, Fairne rose and left the room without looking back.

She let her head rest on Rytor's chest. She could feel the bandages through the thin sheet covering him as she wept.

"See, I knew you were lying," she whispered. "How is this keeping your oath, my love?"

The girl began to shake uncontrollably as her sorrow overtook her. She screamed at the top of her lungs, a horrible, blood-curdling sound. She only screamed one word, but it was the only word that was needed to express what she was feeling.

"WHY?" she screamed to the heavens, but no answer came. After the echo faded, the only sounds in the room were her own sobs and Rytor's labored breathing.

She wrapped her arms around his limp form, paying no mind to his injuries – what did making them worse matter at this point? – and sobbed into his chest. She was vaguely aware that she was feeling rather strange at the moment, but passed the feeling off as just a part of her despair. She also ignored what she thought was an eased quality to his breathing, assuming that was nothing more than simple wishful thinking. After a long while, she laid his body back on the bed and straightened the covers over him. She smiled bitterly as she brushed the hair out of his eyes once again.

“Well, my love,” she said quietly. “I have a promise to keep as well. I told you I would not stand by and watch someone else I care for die, nor would I let you die in my arms. Light, I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me, but I have to leave. You are and always will be the first true love of my life. I will carry you with me for the rest of my days, and I will never forget you. I love you, Rytor al’Monar, now and forever. Rest well. I’ll miss you.”

She leaned over and kissed him softly on the lips before turning and grabbing her pack from the floor. She paused before going out the door, then pulled her wedding dress from its place in the room’s wardrobe and stuffed it into her pack as well. Arica opened the door to the room and looked back, admiring her love one final time before closing the door and heading down the hallway. She passed through the common room for only a moment on her way to the kitchen, but she still managed to see her uncle. He was sitting on the other side of the common room, trying to comfort Rytor’s parents. He glanced up and met her eyes as she paused in the doorway. She gave him a sad smile that caused him to look at her questioningly, and then went into the kitchen. Quickly, she grabbed a few provisions and went out the back door, heading for the stables as fast as she could manage.

Fairne hurried out the back door as quickly as his wounds would allow, searching desperately for his niece. He had a haunting suspicion that he knew what she had done,

and he didn't like it one bit. The fact that he probably never could have talked her out of it did little to ease his mind. Seeing nothing, he made his way to the stables, causing the young stable boy to cry out in fear at his sudden appearance.

“Tell me boy,” he said, putting a good bit of command into his voice. “Did a pretty blonde girl come in here in the last little while?”

“Y-yes, sir,” the boy replied nervously. “She had me saddle her a horse then headed out before I could even tighten the thing properly. Went down that road like the Dark One himself was after her.”

“Watch your mouth, child. And thank you for the information.”

He turned on his heel and stormed out of the stables, looking down the road in the direction of the Eastern gates. She had run, alright. And there was no telling how much of a start she had on him. Shaking his head, he turned and headed back to the inn. He was pretty sure he knew her reasoning, and he was also pretty sure he could explain it to Tomar and Allyna. But when he finally caught up to that foolish little girl, he was going to strap the hide off her if it killed him.

VII – THE WEDDING DAY

Arica dropped to her knees as the remains of her meager breakfast came up with a gurgle. Holding onto a nearby tree for support, she emptied her stomach on the side of the road, struggling in vain to figure out what was wrong with her. She had been fine until about half an hour ago, and now she felt as though she were dying.

Once the sickness subsided to a few dry heaves, she used the tree she had been holding as leverage to roll herself away from the fouled area. Resting her back against a different tree, she began fumbling in her pack for one of the skins of water she had included for her journey. Upon finding it, she took a small drink, swished it around in her mouth, and then spit it out before taking another longer drink that she swallowed. Leaning her head against the tree for support, she let her mind begin to drift, hoping that by ignoring her upset stomach it would go away.

Let's see, she thought. Back to the house in Baerlon, tell the landlord I'm leaving, sell the few things Rytor and I have gathered and continue east. Maybe I can reach Caemlyn by winter. Light with me, surely I can make a living there.

After a few moments, her stomach seemed to have ceased its churning, so she replaced the skin of water in her pack and stood slowly. When nothing happened with her stomach, she picked up her pack and started back to her horse. Just before she mounted it, she paused and looked back one last time towards Rytor. She was almost sure he would have died by now, and a tear slipped down her cheek slowly.

“No time for that,” she muttered as she wiped her eyes dejectedly. “Too much to do to have time to mourn. And sick to boot. This is without a doubt the most miserable day of my life!”

Carefully, she pulled herself into the saddle and heeled the animal, refusing to look back again.

Not even a half an hour later, she realized her sickness was gone as quickly as it had come, as if it had never even been. In fact, if it weren't for her broken heart, she would have said she had never felt better.

Slowly, the world began to come back into focus. The nightmare was receding, intense pain now replaced by equally intense hunger, as though he had not eaten in weeks instead of hours. He also felt a bit light-headed, as though he were still on the edges of a deep sleep. Images ran through his mind, finally stopping on the sword protruding from his chest, a Taraboner warrior still grasping its hilt, and a sharp searing pain....

With a start, Rytor came fully awake and sat up quickly, reaching for his chest. Much to his surprise, he found it to be whole and unblemished rather than covered with a massive wound or even a bandage. But the Taraboner attack – that couldn't have been a dream, could it?

He noticed movement out of the corner of his eye and turned towards it. He was dimly aware that he was in a bed in his parents' inn, and that four people were staring at him with a mixture of confusion and joy. The face of Darania, the village Wisdom filled his vision before he could determine more and he jerked back reflexively.

“How – how are you feeling?” she asked cautiously.

Rytor had to work his throat for a moment before he could get out a response.
“Hungry. What happened?”

The old woman glanced over at the other three people in the room. His parents and Arica's uncle Fairne, he noted to himself as he listened to the old Wisdom.

“I'd heard of this, but I never expected to see it here,” she was saying. “Since his condition improved so drastically after we left her alone with him, I guess that's the only explanation. I'll send word to Tar Valon that there is a young girl who just manifested the ability to channel in this area.”

“You bloody well will not!”

Rytor snapped his head towards the sound of that voice. Fairne was stalking towards the Wisdom with a look of pure anger on his face.

“The last thing she needs is a bunch of bloody *Aes Sedai* dogging her every step!”

As the two glared at each other, a sure argument on its way, a thought snapped to Rytor’s mind. Looking around the room quickly, he realized someone was missing.

“Wait,” he said firmly. “Where’s Arica?”

PART FOUR

The One Power

I – EXHAUSTION

Arica shivered for what felt like the millionth time as she poked the dwindling fire with a small stick. She had been on the road for only two weeks, but it felt like a lifetime since she had been in front of a true fire and been thoroughly warm. She had not even seen an inn since she left Baerlon on the road towards Caemlyn. Of course, the fact that she had cut through the woods after the second group of brigands had tried to have their way with her didn't help matters.

She had stopped at the home she shared – at least she used to share, before... - with Rytor in Baerlon long enough to pack a few things and arrange for the rest to be sold after she had gone. She remembered when she first left home, she had thought of going to Caemlyn to try and make a real living. After what happened with Rytor, she thought it might be a good idea to go ahead with that original plan. She didn't think about the fact that winter was getting ready to set in, however, and now she regretted not staying in Baerlon for a while longer – at least until spring.

It wasn't having to duck off the road for this trip that bothered her so much as the fact that she had run away from yet another problem instead of facing it and dealing with the consequences. She was sure her guilt over the matter was immense – she had been sick more than once since she left, and nerves were the most likely culprit. Every now

and again she noticed she was feeling wonderful – colors seemed brighter, the air seemed fresher, and she just felt more *alive* – but like as not, the sickness came only a day or so after that feeling of peacefulness.

At least the bouts seem to be getting weaker, she thought hopefully.

If the sickness wasn't bad enough, she was no longer completely sure where she was anymore. She was fairly certain she was still in Amador, and as long as she continued following the sun as it rose and set she should still be headed East towards Caemlyn and Cairhein. Either would do for a start, but she knew she would have to find a village between here and there soon. Her food was running out rapidly and her riding boots were wearing thin at the soles.

But that was a worry for morning. With a sigh she pulled her cloak around her and scooted as close to the fire as she dared. She would have to trust that it would not get out of control as she slept. If she put the fire out, she was afraid she would freeze before morning.

Her thoughts turned to Rytor again as she drifted in that space between awake and asleep. They seemed to drift this way every night, and she was sure it would be little different than the days following Moria's death. She mourned both her friend and her love, but she also mourned for herself. It seemed that anyone who loved her paid an

ultimate price for it. She hoped her Uncle Fairne had not fallen victim to this curse she appeared to carry. With luck, her leaving when she did kept him from the worst of it.

But it was Rytor's smiling face that came to her as her eyes fluttered closed. Her body shuddered once before sleep claimed her and her last waking thought was that she knew she would relive the moment of his death in her dreams once again.

Arica awoke from her restless sleep shivering. She rubbed her eyes, trying to focus through the haze of recently interrupted slumber. The ground seemed too bright for some reason, but she was having a hard time getting her mind to work out the question for a solution. She stretched and sat up, putting her palms on the ground behind her so she could stretch out more of the kinks in her back. Her hands sank to the wrists in cold wetness, causing her to come fully awake with a start.

Light! That's snow!

She stared in wonder at the virgin white landscape that surrounded her. Winter wasn't due for several weeks yet, much less a full snowfall. True, this was the furthest from home she had ever been, but she hadn't gone far enough for the seasons to change this drastically yet. The wind was like a razor, cutting through her blouse with merciless cold. She shook the snow from her cloak and wrapped it around her, trying desperately to get warm. While it cut the wind down to a manageable level, it also managed to trap

more of the cold against her body. With bitterness, she glanced over at the ring of small rocks where she had lit a fire the night before. Just as she feared, it was covered with icy snow as well. She had no idea when the fire had been smothered, but it must have been out for a long time to account for the chill that seemed to have permeated her bones.

Blinking her eyes against the reflection from the sun, she packed her things as quickly as she could and tossed her pack over her shoulder. As she gathered her bearings, she regretting once again having trading her horse to the peddler she had met a week ago to get supplies for the trip. Walking through the woods in this weather was asking for trouble, but standing here in one spot was not much better. She mumbled a brief prayer and headed off in what she hoped was east. With luck, she could find another small village fairly quickly so she could warm up and get some hot food inside her.

After several hours of walking her hopes for warmth had diminished greatly. She could barely feel her feet anymore, and her muscles felt like they were turning to stone. Instead of clearing out to reveal a road like she had hoped, the woods had seemed to close in more and more, becoming more oppressive than ever. Either she had veered further off course than she thought, or the woods would become almost impassible before she reached a road. Her stomach growled for what must have been the hundredth time, noisily reminding her that she had skipped breakfast this morning. The snow appeared to be getting thicker the more she walked, and she was sure she would need all the strength she could get if she was going to make it much further before nightfall, even though it was more than half the day away.

Glumly, she found a fallen tree that wasn't too buried in the snow and sat on it, pulling her pack open and digging around for the dried meat she had stored in it. She decided to conserve her flint and steel since it was almost worn out and she knew she would have to light at least one more fire tonight before it died completely. That meant all she had to wash the meat down with was ice cold water.

Once she finished eating, she headed out again, hoping desperately that she would live through the day or reach Caemlyn in an impossible time. The snow was treacherous here in the woods, and she felt she had only made it a few spans before she had to sit down and rest again.

She kept it up until the sun began slipping down behind the distant hills before beginning her search for a place to set up camp. Exhaustion threatened to overcome her as she stumbled along, trying to get as far as possible before stopping. The walk might not have been as bad if she had been sleeping properly, but it had been almost a full week since she had gotten a good night's sleep, and her body was having a hard time compensating. It was almost full dark when she gave up and collapsed onto a rock, resigned to spending another night in the woods and praying she wouldn't freeze to death. Her feet and hands were completely numb from the cold, so she rubbed her palms together briskly, trying to get some feeling back so she could start her fire.

Arica looked around her surroundings as she rubbed her hands, searching for some sign that she was headed in the right direction. Her eyes settled on a small glow through the trees in the distance. Her breath caught in her throat as her hands paused. She stared intently at the faint glow, first to convince herself she was really seeing it, then to try and see if it was what she hoped it was. If only it would... there! The glow flickered slightly. It was either a small fire or a candle; it was impossible to tell for sure at this distance, but either one could mean salvation from another cold night.

She stood slowly, her eyes fixed on the glow as she considered her options. It could be a group of people at their camp, possibly even a group of Tinkers. That would be glorious if it was; the Tinkers' reputation was that they always welcomed people into their camps. On the other hand, it could be another group of brigands. They would probably welcome her into their camp, too, but their welcome would be nowhere near as pleasant as the Tinkers'. Then again, she had done much worse for no better reason than to get a couple of silver marks or a gold crown on rare occasions. Surely she could do what she must in order to save her own life.

With a pained swallow, Arica nodded her head once, her decision made. If it was brigands, she would do what she must to survive. Slipping one hand onto the hilt of her dagger, she decided that if things went too bad, she would make sure some of them went with her. A determined look on her face, she staggered towards the distant glow, preparing herself mentally for whatever she would come upon – except what she found.

She found a cabin.

The cabin was really not much more than a run-down shack in the middle of a small clearing, but at the moment it looked like the King's palace in Bandar Eban to Arica. She paused at the edge of the clearing, blinking several times to make sure what she was seeing was not just some delusion brought on by the cold and her exhaustion. With the moonlight reflecting off of the snow, she could just make out the putty that had been used to fill the cracks in the walls. She could also see the smoke rising from the chimney that looked ready to collapse at any moment. The glass in the small window shone with the glow from a candle on the table inside. Noticing the silhouette of what seemed to be a woman sitting at the table, Arica gathered what strength she had left and raced to the door. She fell several times on the way, but forced herself back upright and lurched ahead again. She collapsed into the door with a massive thud and slid to a crouch.

She barely noticed the old woman who opened the door, nor did she hear clearly when the woman exclaimed in surprise. She had time to wonder how this frail old woman could find the strength to lift her and carry her inside before the world swam away and her vision went black.

II – THE OLD WOMAN

Arica awoke slowly, her eyes fluttering to get used to the bright light streaming across her face. Disorientation set in as she discovered herself in a warm bed, thick

blankets pulled up to her neck. Glancing around unfocused, she was mildly surprised to find herself in a small room, her traveling clothes folded neatly on a chair next to the small table beside her bed. A covered plate sat on the table, a steaming mug resting behind it. She sat up slowly, turning so her legs slipped off the side of the bed. She wiggled her toes bemusedly, relieved that she could feel them again. The blanket pooled in her lap, revealing her to be naked, but for the moment she was unconcerned about that – she was warm and felt well-rested and that was all that mattered.

Standing carefully, expecting the cramps in her muscles to return at any moment, she crossed the room and removed the napkin from the plate. Bread, cheese, and a large slab of what looked like ham were arranged on the plate. Her mouth began watering instantly as she fell to the food with a passion. She hadn't realized how hungry she was. She was pleasantly surprised to find the mug filled with mulled wine as she drained it as well. She was equally startled to discover her plate was now empty.

Burn me! Did I finish that already?

“Ah, you're awake!”

Arica turned towards the voice with a start as she remembered where she must be. The woman she could have sworn was almost venerable the night before wasn't as old as she thought. Her blonde hair was streaked with gray, but her face was as smooth as Arica's own, with an ageless quality that made it nearly impossible to determine how old

she really was. Her dress was simple enough, but she carried herself with a dignified stance that belied the farm girl look she seemed to be trying to cultivate. Arica's mind spun as she tried to recall what the old stories she had heard as a child said about women with ageless features and dignified postures. The old woman ignored the look of concentration on Arica's face and continued speaking to her.

“You gave me quite a scare last night, girl, slamming into my door like that. You must be either very brave or very foolish to be out in weather like that with no more protection from it than you had on. Why, I pulled you in and got you out of those wet clothes and in front of that fire so fast you'd think my own life depended on it. I gave you a warm bath and tucked you into that bed, and I've been hoping that what I did for the injuries you'd sustained was enough. From the condition of that plate, I'd say it must have done some good after all.”

Arica's mind spun until her eyes widened slightly as realization set in about the stories she had heard. She swallowed and carefully asked the question she was almost too scared to ask.

“Are – are you an *Aes Sedai*?”

The woman flinched as if someone slapped her and a dark look crossed her face briefly before being replaced by the kindly smile once again.

“Burn me, no, child! I suppose that much like you I’d be what those misguided women call a wilder. I personally just consider myself Chosen, but to each their own. You can call me Murandae. I don’t believe I had a chance to get your name?”

“Arica,” the girl responded distractedly. Something about what Murandae just said....

“Well, Arica,” Murandae continued. “There’s no need going out in that weather just yet, so you can put on one of the dresses in the closet over there if you’d like, then come out to the sitting room and keep me company. It gets lonely out here in the woods, and I would be more than happy to give you a hot meal and a warm place to stay until the snow breaks.”

The younger girl shook her head as the woman’s words sank in.

“Murandae,” she began slowly, the confusion she felt bleeding over into her voice. “What did you mean when you said you were a ‘wilder like me’?”

The ageless woman merely offered her a kind grin. “I thought you might ask that. You don’t appear to be very old yet. Get dressed and meet me in the sitting room. I’ll give you some more of that ham and we can talk for a bit.”

Murandae smiled again and walked out of the small bedroom, closing the door behind her. Arica stood and walked over to the closet to find a dress, her mind a whirlwind. She had not been secluded growing up, even though her village was small. They still had their share of important people come through and she managed to hear her fair share of stories from them. She remembered that a “wilder” was what *Aes Sedai* supposedly called women who had the ability to channel – to touch something called the One Power and perform amazing feats with it – but were not enrolled at the White Tower in Tar Valon with the rest of the *Aes Sedai*. If Murandae had told her that she was one of these “wilders” like her....

Suddenly Arica’s trip to Caemlyn didn’t seem as important as it had the day before. It appeared that she had some more urgent questions that needed answering, not the least of which was whether or not she was a witch like the *Aes Sedai*, and if that meant they would be after her now as well. She hurried her search through the closet to find a dress so she could go and talk to the old woman and hopefully get those answers.

Murandae was sitting at her table next to the window when Arica emerged from the bedroom. Another plate of ham and bread was sitting in front of the chair across from the old woman. Arica moved to the chair in a dreamlike state, almost as if she were being drawn by the scent of the meat on the plate. She could hardly believe that she was still hungry after devouring one full meal already, but her stomach seemed to think that she hadn’t eaten in a week.

As she pulled out the chair and sat down, Murandae smiled and motioned to the food.

“Go ahead and eat, child. There will be time for your questions after.”

Arica did as she was told and finished this second plate faster than she had the first.

What is wrong with me? If I keep this up, I'm going to look like old Mistress Luene!

Once she wiped her mouth with a napkin Murandae gave her, she settled back into the chair and tried to piece together what she wanted to ask. The old woman must have seen the look on her face, because she laughed softly as she gazed at Arica.

“Take your time. I know there is much you wish to learn, but it’s best if you come to it at your own speed,” Murandae said. “It seems to make it a bit easier to hear that way.”

Despairingly, Arica realized there was no easy way to ask what she needed to ask other than to just come out with it, so she steeled herself and took a deep breath before she began.

“You said you were ‘a wilder like me’,” she began slowly. “What did you mean by that?”

The smile never left Murandae’s face as she answered simply, “I mean that you have the ability to channel, child.”

Arica sucked in a breath and shook her head. “No,” she replied vehemently. “It’s not possible!”

The older woman did not respond other than to nod once and continue to smile.

The chair fell over as Arica lurched to her feet. She wrapped her arms around herself to ward off the chill that was beginning to creep down her spine as she walked over to the fire and stared into the flames. “How could you know, anyway?” she murmured.

“Light, girl! You were shining like the sun from embracing the source when you crashed into my door last night,” Murandae replied. “I was rather shocked to see it, truth be told.”

Arica turned to look at the woman again. “What does that mean, ‘embracing the source’?”

Murandae rose and came to face Arica shaking her head slowly. “One thing at a time, child. You have to be made to realize that you are a channeler before we can get into the mechanics of it. You have had times, times where you needed something more than you ever needed anything else in the world, or wanted something more than you ever wanted anything before when you got it, haven’t you?”

Remembering several times in the last couple of weeks when she needed just one more span from her horse, even though it was near exhaustion, that the horse made it further. Or when she couldn’t get her fire lit and it suddenly sprang to life. These things raced through her mind and she was left with no choice but to nod, her eyes anchored to the floorboards of the cabin.

“And then,” the older woman continued. “Maybe a day or two later, you were hit by a sickness that came on suddenly, raged intensely for an hour or so, then abated as suddenly as it had appeared.”

A heavy weight beginning to settle in her chest, Arica nodded again.

“What that means, dear Arica, is that you were born with the spark, and now it demands to be fanned into a blaze. You can channel; you are a wilder. Just like me.”

Arica was silent for a long moment. Try as she might, she knew she could not deny the things the woman had told her. It all made sense once she looked back on it and considered that those moments of good fortune had been her channeling it into existence. She didn't want it to be so, but not wanting it to be and it not being were two totally different things.

She finally raised her head and looked at Murandae evenly.

"So now what?" she asked. "Journey to the White Tower in Tar Valon and tell the *Aes Sedai* what I am and what I can do? Ignore it and go on with my life?"

"Light, no!" Murandae exclaimed. "You do neither of those things! I told you I am a wilder like you. I have never been trained at the White Tower, nor do intend to go bowing and scraping to them now in my old age. And ignoring it is not an option either, child. You either learn to control it, or it could very likely kill you."

Arica couldn't believe what she had just heard.

"Kill me!" she cried. "Are you telling me that I have this cursed thing I never wanted or asked for, and now it's going to kill me?"

"Not if I have anything to say about it. I'm sure you noticed your appetite was rather impressive this morning?"

The younger girl merely nodded.

“That is because I used a Healing weave on you last night. It drains a good bit of energy from both parties involved, and you have to have a way to replenish that energy. It took more out of you than it did me, though. You should consider it lucky that your injuries weren’t more severe than they were. Your hunger should be fading about now.”

Arica nodded again as she realized her appetite had lessened a bit after finishing that second plate.

“Well,” Murandae continued. “I didn’t go and heal you and warm you just to have you up and die on me for something else. I am going to teach you how to control the abilities you have, you are going to stay here and learn, and that’s all there is to it.”

It was easy for Arica to pick up the tone of Murandae’s voice. She had been around enough noblemen to know the sound of command when she heard it. Her Uncle Fairne got the same edge to his voice on the occasions he had chastised Arica for some silly prank or misdeed. And if this woman really could teach her how to avoid having this curse kill her, then it probably would be in her best interest to stay and learn.

“Okay,” she told the older woman. “I will stay and learn. I appreciate you healing me, and if you can keep this from being the death of me, I will be in your debt even further.”

“Perfect! There is a wash basin in your bedroom and hot water on the fire. Go clean up and we’ll begin your lessons!” The old woman grinned at Arica, obviously pleased that she had agreed with the command.

As Arica carried the pot to the wash basin, she couldn’t help but wonder why she felt the other woman’s smile had been a bit predatory just then.

III – WILDER

Arica stood gazing out the small window of her bedroom. She had come to regard it as hers in the month since she had arrived here since Murandae insisted she take it to sleep. Arica wasn’t even completely sure that the older woman slept at all; she was still awake when Arica went to bed, and was awake with breakfast ready whenever she got up in the mornings.

Winter was in full swing now, the remaining vestiges of leaves having fallen from the trees more than three weeks ago. Not long after her arrival in fact. It would be some time before it would be safe enough for her to continue on her way to Caemlyn. On the one hand she found this mildly disappointing since she had been planning the trip for so

long now, but on the other hand it was a relief since she obviously still had so much to learn about channeling.

The instruction she had received thus far had been both astonishing and taxing. Murandae was a kind enough woman, but there were moments when Arica was convinced the old woman was going to push her until her head exploded. They worked on her lessons for several hours each day and like as not she fell into bed exhausted and with a raging headache as well.

Murandae had managed to teach her the basics at least – the things she would need to stay alive. She had learned that the One Power was just another name for a portion of the True Source – an energy whose nature was known to no one except perhaps the Creator. She also learned that men and women touched the one power differently; in fact, it had both a male and female aspect. The male aspect was called *saidin*, and it was because of a taint placed upon it by the Dark One when he was imprisoned that the few men who could touch it in this Age went mad after some time using it. The old woman taught her that in the Age of Legends, men could touch the source without that concern, and were also enlisted among the ranks of the *Aes Sedai*, an Old Tongue phrase that translated loosely as “servant of all”.

She also learned about the aspect of the One Power that would concern her the most – the female half called *saidar*. Mercifully, *saidar* was spared of the Dark One’s taint, so women who channeled would not go mad like their male counterparts. This

revelation eased Arica's mind considerably, since the stories she had heard as a child made no distinction between the two. It was *saidar* that she would touch when she channeled.

The act of channeling proved no easy task to control, either, though. First she had to reach out and touch *saidar*, an act called "embracing the source". Murandae told her to imagine a flower, and then imagine herself becoming that flower, becoming one with it. Once everything was gone except for the flower, she should open herself to *saidar* and allow it to flow into her.

Arica tried, and for the first few days nothing happened. The only time something came close to happening was when her mind wandered to Rytor and the first night they spent in each other's arms. As she relived the feel of his hands on her bare flesh, Murandae had cried out in joy. Arica jumped and turned to look at her, only to find the woman frowning again.

"It was there for a moment," the old woman had muttered, before asking a bit louder "What were you thinking of just now?"

Arica had blushed as she told her, but Murandae had merely rubbed her chin thoughtfully. She explained that Arica possessed what was called a "block" – a certain state of mind or physical condition that must be met before she could touch the source. The next few days had been the hardest of all, as the old woman tried to break the block.

She would have Arica tell her in vivid detail about her nights spent in Rytor's arms, then when the Arica reached a point where her face was flushed and she was longing to feel that again in reality the old woman slapped her broadly across the face, dumped water over her head, or even turned her upside-down with the Power and shook her. Eventually, she reached a point where she was so angry she touched the source involuntarily. At that moment, Murandae had smiled and Arica never again had trouble embracing the source whenever she chose to.

That had taken place only three days ago and Arica had learned much since. Murandae explained that channeling was like taking threads from the Pattern of the Ages and weaving them with the Power to make something happen. In fact, specific things that could be done with the Power were even called "weaves". She even managed to learn how the old woman had known Arica was a channeler – apparently when one woman embraces the source, she can see other women who are doing the same. Arica had touched it without conscious thought on the night she arrived, and Murandae embraced it when she heard a slam on the door. The woman demonstrated to Arica by embracing the source so she could see – the older woman had been glowing like a star when Arica looked at her. Then Murandae started teaching her to cast weaves.

Casting weaves apparently required two things – a talent for the type of weave being cast, and an affinity for the elements used to create the weaves. There were many talents, including many that had been lost since the Age of Legends, but only five

affinities – for Air or Wind, Fire, Water, Earth, and Spirit. A weave could use one or more of the affinities to create, but was always from one talent.

The first weave she learned was how to manipulate Air and Spirit to see things that were far off as if she were standing there. Murandae had told her it was called “the distant eye”, and she could see how this would have been useful back home. She could have kept an eye on Moria wherever she went. Maybe then she wouldn’t have run off to Lord Draven and gotten....

Arica shook her head as she stepped away from the window and her thoughts. She had learned a few other things as well, including how to hear someone who was also far away, and how to create arms out of thin air. Today, Murandae had promised to teach her something she could use to defend herself if need be.

At least learning things was simple enough. All she had to do was watch Murandae do something – sometimes it took more than once, but not usually – and she could see exactly how to tie the threads together to duplicate it. Murandae told her it was an innate ability for all channellers called weavesight, but Arica could care less about what the name of it was. As far as she was concerned, it was a way to keep from getting killed by her ability.

She was extremely thankful that Murandae had also explained how untrained girls ended up getting killed by the Power. Embracing *saidar* was the most beautiful

experience she ever had. She wanted to pull more and more of it into her. But this was the danger, she had been taught. If she pulled more into herself than she could control, it would consume her. In the best case scenario, it stripped the ability to channel from her – an act Murandae called “severing”, though she also said the modern *Aes Sedai* called it “stilling” when it happened to a woman and “gentling” when it happened to a man. The worst case scenario had two things that could happen. The kindest of these was that it could fry her mind and leave her an empty, unthinking shell. The worst was an extremely violent death as *saidar* stripped her physical form away.

She shuddered as she thought about it. For that reason if nothing else, she would be happy to stay and learn from the old woman until she was sure she would be able to control things without a guide.

She picked up her dirty clothes from the past few days so they could wash them in the pot of water Murandae had brought in this morning for that purpose. As she carried them into the other room, she silently berated herself for getting lost in her thoughts. She had chores to do before her lessons, and this was one she was excited about. She wasn't sure exactly what this self-defense weave she was going to learn was, but Murandae had told her it would without a doubt be something to give any *Aes Sedai* she ever encountered pause to see.

That *definitely* had promise!

IV – WHAT IT TAKES

Arica hurried through the wash, anxiously anticipating today's lesson. She nearly dropped the clothes back on the floor as she slung them over the small cord Murandae had strung through the sitting room near the fire so they could dry. Normally the old woman just used the Power to dry them, a trick Arica had managed to pick up as well, but she was nowhere to be found at the moment. Arica considered using the weave herself, but the old woman frowned on her using the power any time except when they were in their lessons. Not wanting to ruin her chance of learning something exciting today, she hung the clothes normally and snatched her cloak off of its hook as she rushed out the door.

She found Murandae behind the cabin near the small pen where the woman kept a few meager pigs for slaughter. Two of them were outside the pen, tied with a long rope to a pair of trees. Murandae looked over at her with a smile as she approached.

“You've finished your chores, dear?” she asked.

Arica nodded as she answered. “Yes ma'am, I have.”

“Good. Then you must be ready for the day's lesson. Afterwards, you will also learn how to clean pigs so the meat can be cooked.”

The girl's smile slipped a little at her mentor's words, but her excitement did not diminish. If cleaning pigs was the price she had to pay for the day's lesson, then she didn't see that she had too much choice in the matter. She began to acknowledge the older woman when a voice behind her made her jerk in surprise.

"Well, well, well," came a man's deep, amused voice. "Look what we got here!"

Arica had time to notice the dangerous twinkle in Murandae's eyes before she whirled around to face the three men coming into the clearing from the woods. They were all stocky men, unshaven, and wearing filthy rags. They also wore swords as well, which they drew as they approached. Her breath caught in her throat as she noticed the heron-mark on the leader's blade – the mark of a Blademaster!

"Looks like an old woman and her granddaughter to me, Karl," said one of the two following the leader.

The man in front – Karl, it seemed – glanced back at his companions and gave a toothy grin.

"Looks more like an old woman and some entertainment to me," he snarled.

"Figure we can kill the old woman after she tells us where to find her money, then kill the whelp after we amuse ourselves with her."

The men all laughed as they regarded the two women across the clearing. Arica was preparing herself to run when she heard Murandae's quiet, steady voice.

"No, gentlemen, I don't believe you will."

The laughter cut off slowly as Karl raised his heron-mark blade at the women.

"That so?" he asked. "Who you think gonna stop us, old woman?"

"Arica," Murandae said, ignoring the men completely. "Pay attention to me, now. I was going to teach you this with those two pigs tied up over there, but the three loose ones here will do just as well. Watch me, and then repeat the weave on one of the others."

The young girl watched intently as the woman embraced *saidar* and quickly weaved air, water, and spirit just so....

Karl screamed in agony as the sound of tearing flesh and popping bones echoed through the clearing. The scream stopped suddenly as he dropped to the ground like a stone, his head and limbs bent at unnatural angles. Arica barely had time to register the sickening sound as he hit the snow before she did as she was instructed and copied her teacher exactly. The man she was looking at had started to turn and run, but suddenly found himself staring back at the women as his body continued towards the woods he had

come out of. His spine appeared to curl itself into a ball before he fell as well to join his companions who were already on the ground.

Arica stared in shock at what she and Murandae had done before doubling over and emptying her stomach on the frozen earth. The old woman came and put a hand gently on her back as her breakfast came up violently. When she was finished, she stood and faced her mentor, wiping her mouth as she did so.

“What you just did is called ‘Rend’,” Murandae said quietly. “It is not something I would suggest doing very often, since few people actually know what that is, much less how to do it. The ones who do know what it is will not look kindly on someone who is using it without a bloody good reason.”

The girl could do nothing but nod as sobs began to wrack her body. *Light, what did I just...? Light! I bloody killed him! Twisted him apart! Blood and bloody ashes, what have I done?*

Murandae pulled her into a warm embrace and stroked her hair as she wept.

“It’s never pleasant to kill another man,” Murandae said soothingly. “Even less pleasant when you do it like that. But there are times when you have to do what you must to survive. Only use that in self-defense, and then only when you have no other choices.”

Arica nodded against the old woman's chest as she pulled her tears under control. She pulled away after a long moment and consciously avoided looking at the pile of bodies across the clearing.

Murandae reached out and tilted the girl's chin up so she could look her in the eyes.

“Go in and try to take a nap, child. I believe that will be enough of a lesson for today. You go on in, warm up, take a quick bath, and try and sleep while I take care of this mess. We still need to clean one of these pigs for our evening meal, but I will do that while you rest. I can always teach you how another day.

Arica nodded slowly and turned towards the cabin, wondering mildly if she would ever sleep again.

The old woman watched Arica walk towards the cabin, mildly amused at the effort the girl took to keep her eyes from the three dead men. Teaching the girl to control her budding abilities was good for passing the time, but it offered no real excitement or challenge. These three were every bit the amusing distraction she had hoped they would be. It was only a brief moment to flex her own ability, but it was better than nothing.

Turning her attention to the mess she had to clean up, she wondered distractedly if any of the others were awake and dealing with similar situations. She had a pretty good idea where one or two of them would be if they were moving about, but the others were a mystery to her. The whereabouts of that bunch was not a good thing to have as a mystery, so she supposed she would have to do some checking about before things got too out of hand.

With a grin, she bent to the task of cleaning up the dead men. Yes, that had been quite refreshing indeed.

V – SEPARATE PATHS

The Wheel of Time turned and days stretched into weeks and weeks stretched into months. Arica still had nightmares about the day the brigands came to the cabin, but she was able to sleep through the night more often than not as time faded the memories into a shadow of what they began as.

Four months had passed since she came to the cabin and began learning with Murandae. The snows finally melted, but the icy wind that blew through the trees in the early mornings and at dusk told her that winter was holding on for all it was worth. It had come quicker than normal and was holding on far too long to be natural, but it must eventually pass as it always did.

The old woman had sat her down the night before and told her it was time she was heading on her way. Arica had been mildly disappointed since she had actually found herself at peace for the first time in a long while staying here. But Murandae had said she herself would be moving on soon and would be going to a place where Arica would not be safe to follow. She said nothing more on the subject, but Arica wondered where the woman could possibly be going that she would be unsafe to be with her.

Arica stuffed the last dress into her small pack and straightened her blouse. She had changed back into her breeches and blouse this morning since she felt it would be impractical to go wandering down the road in a dress. Murandae had insisted she keep the dressed she had worn while she was here since they would only be added weight when the old woman began her own journey. Hefting the pack onto her shoulders, she took one last look around the small bedroom she had come to think of as her own after all these months. A tear formed in her eyes and she brushed it away roughly. This was not the time to be sentimental. What must be was going to be, and there was little she could do to change that.

With an uncontrollable sigh, she turned and walked into the sitting room where Murandae sat sipping a mug of hot tea left over from breakfast. The woman offered her a warm smile as she came in and sat down on the other chair at the table.

“Are you all packed and ready to go, my dear?” the woman asked, a note of sadness in her voice.

Arica merely nodded in response, finding the lump that had formed in her throat too difficult to talk around.

Murandae pushed a second mug of tea over to Arica. “Join me for one last drink before you leave, dear. There is still one more thing I need to discuss with you.”

The woman rose and came to stand behind Arica as the girl sipped her tea. She placed her hands on Arica’s head gently and began stroking her hair.

“I wish we could stay together, my child, but our paths lead in different directions,” she said softly as she embraced the source and began to weave all five of the elements together. Arica’s eyelids began to droop.

“As it is,” the woman continued, “it is probably best that you forget you were ever here. You will remember what you have learned, but you will sleep and forget where you learned it and who you learned it from once you awaken. Sleep well, child. I may come for you again one day wearing my true shape. You will recognize me as a friend, but you will not realize how you recognize me.”

With that she released the threads of the weave and smiled as Arica slumped forward onto the table, spilling her tea in the process. The woman went to the door and let in the man who had been standing just outside of it.

“You do remember your instructions, don’t you?” she asked brusquely.

“Yes, Mistress,” the man answered with a deep bow.

The woman scowled at him. “Just to be sure, I’ll tell you again. Take the girl and her things to the edge of the Caemlyn road. Put her gently under some bushes there and watch her until she wakes up. Don’t let anything happen to her. If someone comes upon her and attempts to do her bodily harm, kill them and dispose of the body. I may be watching you, as well, and if I catch you attempting to do anything untoward with her, you will know what it means to anger one of the Chosen!”

The man’s face was flat against the cabin floor, so deep was his bow. “I live to serve, Mistress. My life belongs to the Great Lord and to his agents.”

“Don’t forget that,” she mumbled in response. “Well,” she said louder. “On with it! I have much to prepare for!”

The man jerked to his feet and carefully placed Arica over his shoulder. He picked up her pack and marked a quick bow before he rushed out the door.

After he was gone, the woman who was calling herself Murandae smiled faintly. Whatever Age this was, it was nice to see that Darkfriends hadn’t changed at all.

Resuming her seat at the table, she channeled the surface dry and pulled out her notes once more. It was time to figure out where the others were.

Let's see, she thought. Lanfear will be looking for Lews Therin, but what about the others?

Arica groaned and rolled over, pushing herself upright as she looked around. She was underneath a bush beside a wide dirt road. The sun was beginning to go down, at least giving her a sense of direction. It only took her a moment to figure out which direction it was to Caemlyn, but more important was how she got where she was. The last thing she remembered was running through the woods with snow freezing her feet in her boots. Now there was no snow and her feet felt fine.

There was all the other things that were racing through her head as well, things she couldn't remember learning. Things like the fact that she could channel, and even specifics on what she could do.

She shook her head to try and clear it, but had no luck at it. She had apparently lost a good deal of time somewhere, but she couldn't think of any way to figure out how.

No point worrying yet, she thought grimly. I guess if it's that important, I'll remember eventually.

She picked up her pack and tossed it over her shoulder, wondering briefly why it seemed heavier than before. At least some of what she remembered seemed to be able to help her stay safe. She hoped she would be in Caemlyn before too many more days passed.

With a determined stride, she headed East down the Caemlyn road.

PART FIVE

Turnings of the Wheel

I – WHITEBRIDGE

The rain beat relentlessly down on Arica's head. She had pulled up the hood of her cloak the moment the faint sprinkles turned into a true downpour, but the protection it offered was long since gone. Her clothes were soaked through to her skin, and the cold breeze sliced through them like a knife, chilling her to her bones. The last merchant she passed told her that she was almost to the town of Whitebridge, so named because of the ancient passage across the Arinelle River. Squinting through the deluge, she could just make out the river itself, winding through the plains of Andor. She could see the curve in the road up ahead, that once passed would give her a first glimpse at the landmark.

Pulling the cloak tighter around her in a vain attempt to hold some heat to her body, she trudged ahead through the muddy road, just another weary traveler out in the storm. The road had been full the day before, but the winter rain had driven many of them indoors, apparently willing to delay their journey until it was a bit dryer. Arica had only encountered a few others on the road after the rain began as she woke up. Most of them had been merchants trying to keep their carts from getting stuck in the mud, grumbling about how late they were going to be arriving in Caemlyn with their wares.

Arica was in no rush, but she did regret not waiting this storm out before continuing on her way. But then again, when you are sleeping in barns, it's best not to

hang around too long for the owner to find you. She finally made it to the curve in the road and looked up as she turned it. Her breath caught in her throat as she stared in amazement at the object that gave Whitebridge its name.

Her first thought was to wonder how in the Light a glass bridge managed to hold anything up, but as she got closer she realized it wasn't actually glass. The bridge was huge, an unstained white architectural marvel spanning the Arinelle. While it appeared to be made of some kind of glass or crystal, the bridge was made of highly polished stone. Even though she had never been there, Arica believed this must be the same kind of stone used to build the White Tower in Tar Valon. None of the stories she had ever heard said this was true, and she felt it probably wasn't, but there was no doubt that this bridge had been constructed with the One Power. She felt a touch of pride that she was able to access the same force that had been used to build this beautiful landmark.

She was expecting to lose her footing once she stepped onto the bridge, since it looked so highly polished it must be slippery from the rain. It was startling to discover her footing was surer on the bridge than on the muddy road behind her. The view from the middle was breathtaking, even in the limited visibility provided by the storm. She had a clear view of the Arinelle River for as far as her eyes could see. Boats sat at the dock, servants swarming around them to load or unload the river vessels. She couldn't stop herself for looking to see if any of the Sea Folk – the Athan Miere were down there, even though she knew they never came this far upland from the oceans. She had met some of the Sea Folk on one of the rare occasions she had gone into Bandar Eban, and was

intrigued by their alien customs and appearances. Their pierced and tattooed bodies were extremely unusual, even to the flash and decadence of the Domani, and she always marveled at them. She was disappointed that she wouldn't get to see them here, but then again, this storm was not the best environment to carry on a conversation with anyone.

Once she made it to the other side of the river, she was pleased to discover the road was paved with stones, much like the roads in Bandar Eban. The rain was still keeping most people indoors, so she had the street to herself as she explored the town. The shops were mostly closed already, confirming the suspicion she had that it must be past dusk. Her feet ached and her body seemed to be wracked with shivers from the cold, so she decided to forgo her exploration in favor of an inn and a warm bed for a good night's sleep at last. Arica wandered for a few more minutes until she found an inn that didn't look filled to bursting. Mentally counting the coins she had left, she nodded once to herself and ducked inside.

The Arinelle Inn was nothing at all like the inns Arica had been in during her journey here. The floor was swept clean and the tables were obviously wiped down several times a night. A fire blazed brightly in the hearth on the other side of the common room, casting the few patrons in an orange glow. Four grizzled looking men sitting at a table near the fire eyed her as she walked in and dropped her hood to shake the water from her hair. She frowned as she realized it stayed plastered to her head and narrowed

her eyes slightly as she heard one of the men snicker. The six other patrons in the room paid no mind to either the other men or her.

She looked over as the innkeeper approached, a scowl embedded into his features. He looked her up and down with thinly veiled mistrust as he packed tabac into his pipe. He lit the pipe, stuck it into his mouth, then removed it again all in one smooth motion and pointed the pipe at the door.

“I gots no need for no more serving girls, and I gots no need for singin’ girls either, dearie, do just yous head on back out dat door and don’t hassle me no more,” the man growled at her.

Arica felt her hackles rise as she met the man’s gaze.

“I’m not here for either of those,” she answered irritably. “I want hot tea, a meal, a hot bath, and a room for the night, in that order.”

She ignored the chuckles that emanated from the men near the fire as she stared the old innkeeper down. The man’s scowl deepened as he replaced the pipe in his mouth and drew deeply on it.

“An’ how you plannin’ on payin’ for it, girl?” he asked roughly. “I gots no interest in no special favors you might be offerin’.”

“Light! I’ll take ‘em Harland!” came the cry from one of the men who had been staring at her. “She looks Domani to me, and they’re usually pretty fine favors!”

The girl stared daggers at the man before turning back towards the innkeeper and opening her cloak so he could see her coin purse.

“How much?” she asked between clenched teeth.

The old innkeeper grinned wickedly. “Well, that meal’ll run you five silver pence and the room and bath another mark for the both. You tryin’ ta tell me yous got that kinda coin on you, girl?”

Instead of saying anything, Arica reached into her coin purse and counted out two silver marks. She slapped them onto the counter beside her and the innkeeper and looked him right in his startled eyes.

“You make sure those buffoons leave me be, and you can keep the change. I leave in the morning without a scratch on me and there’s another three marks in it for you. Do we have a deal?”

The man’s eyes appeared ready to leap from their sockets.

“Girl, you knows you’s givin’ me bloody near a gold crown – an’ probably Andoran weight at that?”

Arica gave the man a near exact copy of the wicked grin he gave her earlier.

“Looks like you’re smarter than you look, old man,” she said. “We got a deal or not?”

The man’s gaze remained fixed on the coins.

“You knows I can’t make no promises as far as them men go, don’t ya?” he asked, rubbing a hand across his brow. “I gots me a business to run. I can’t be everywhere you are all the time.”

“I make it through this night and you get paid. That’s the deal I’m offering you. Are you taking it or am I going to a different inn?”

It was a bluff and she knew it. It was well past dusk out there and she knew she would be safer in here with the four loudmouths than she would be outside with Light knew what in the streets. Apparently the old man fell for it though, since he snatched the coins up and made them disappear with all the grace of a master gleeman.

“Alys! Get this young lady a cup of tea,” he called out over his shoulder as he smiled at Arica, genuinely this time. “And a hot meal, too!”

Arica nodded her thanks and moved to a table within reach of the fire’s warmth but still a good distance away from the now irritated looking men. The serving girl brought out a steaming cup of tea so weak it might as well have been water and rushed back to the kitchen with a sketch of a curtsy. Arica smiled as she sipped her tea, relieved that she could rest for a little while.

The bath truly was hot, something Arica was immensely grateful for. She sank lower in the water, allowing the heat to loosen her taut shoulder muscles like it had her calves and thighs. She draped the washcloth over her face and closed her eyes, allowing herself to drift for a few moments as she relaxed.

She had just begun to doze when a crash at the door to the bathing chamber startled her back to consciousness. She pulled the cloth away from her face and felt the blood drain from it. The innkeeper lay crumpled in the hall, the knot that was rising on his head visible even from the tub. The four loudmouths filled the doorway, evil grins across their features. Arica considered grabbing a towel to cover herself, but the time for modesty had already passed. Now it was time to think about survival.

“So you seems to think you ain’t good enough for the likes of us, do you sweet thing?” the one who appeared to be the leader said as he fingered the laces of his breeches. “Guess we have to show you otherwise.”

He took a step forward, his eyes roaming across her as she lay in the now cooling water.

“Nice of you to get yourself all cleaned up so’s we can get you dirty again.”

Arica met his eyes with a look of determination. She wasn’t sure how fast she could channel that weave she had learned, but she was going to find out. She reached out for *saidar* and pulled it to her.

“If you think you can, go ahead and try,” she said, pleased that she managed to keep the waver out of her voice as she spoke.

The man’s face darkened.

“Oh, me thinks I can,” he replied dangerously.

Another crash from the hallway startled all of them, heads whipping towards the place where one of the loudmouths had fallen and the man holding a sword with blood on

it standing over him in the doorway. Arica was so stunned at the sight that she lost her grip on the Power.

“Not if I have anything to say about it,” the newcomer intoned.

The man wielding the sword was tall and well-built, his eyes flashing as he regarded the three remaining men. He modestly kept his gaze away from the naked young girl sitting in a bathtub, but it still appeared as though he knew the position of everyone and everything in the room. Arica also recognized the cut of his clothes and the slight accent in his voice – the man was a Borderlander, most likely a Saldean if she judged the cut right.

The leader of the loudmouths motioned to the other two, causing them to spread out, giving her would-be rescuer a wider base of attack to defend against. Much to Arica’s surprise, the man merely smiled.

“So that’s how you wish to play, is it?” he asked bemusedly. “So be it.”

The man feinted to his right, and then swung the blade in a wide arc to his left. His opponents obviously were less skilled than he, for the slice caught one of the loudmouths across the chest, opening a red line across the skin inside the sliced shirt. The loudmouth on the man’s right charged in, only to discover the man sidestepping in order

to bring the hilt of the sword down on his head with a massive cracking sound. The loudmouth dropped like a stone. The man with the sliced shirt sat down hard, his eyes rolling up in his head as consciousness left him.

“Think you’re somethin’ don’t you, fancy-pants?” the leader mumbled as he drew his own sword.

Arica decided enough was about enough. She was not going to lie here in the bath and let this stranger do all the work to save her skin. Embracing the source once more, she wove flows of air together and bound the leader’s arms to his side. The man’s startled look was rather amusing as the swordsman threw a punch that landed square between the other man’s eyes.

The swordsman smiled as he sheathed his blade, clearly pleased at the job he had done. Arica regarded him with interest, curious as to how he would react to her nakedness now that the danger had passed. The man showed himself to be a true gentleman as he turned his back and held out a towel for her.

“I won’t peek, m’lady,” he said. “Feel free to dry off and cover yourself.”

Arica snorted as she rose from the water and accepted the towel. She wrapped it around her body and pulled another from the nearby stool to wrap her hair with.

“Okay,” she said once she finished. “I’m decent enough for you to face me while you introduce yourself.”

The man spun on his heel and bowed deeply.

“Darius Bashere, at your service madam.”

Arica blinked. *This* was rather interesting.

“I’m Arica,” she replied gracefully. “You’ll forgive me if I don’t curtsy.”

Darius rose and regarded her with a warm smile.

“Of course, Arica. It wouldn’t do for you to expose yourself any more than you’ve already had to.”

Arica shook her head in amazement.

“Saldean?” she managed to ask.

The man’s smile grew wider. “The lady has a good eye.”

At least she had guessed that right. “And the gentleman probably does, too,” she replied. “So could he turn around while I get dressed?”

A slight flush rose in the man’s cheeks. *Ha! Got you!*

“Of course, m’lady,” he mumbled as he turned.

“Did you say your name was Bashere?” she asked as she dropped the wet towels to the floor and reached for the dress she had brought down to change into for the night. “Isn’t that the name of the Marshall-General of Saldea?”

Her memory wasn’t perfect, but it was doing a good imitation tonight.

“Yes it is, m’lady. The Marshall-General is Davram Bashere, uncle to Queen Tenobia, Light preserve her.”

She caught herself nodding, forgetting for a moment that he couldn’t see her with his back turned. She shook her head again in exasperation and pulled on the low boots she had brought down as well.

“Any relation?” she asked.

The man thought a moment before he answered. “Possibly,” he finally replied.
“But distant if it exists at all. I never knew it, at any rate.”

*Good, she thought. At least I won't have to deal with an over-inflated noble's ego
as well as the swordsman's.*

“Ready,” she said out loud, the old clothes rolled up neatly in her hands.

The man turned back to face her and gave her another warm smile. “Would you
like me to escort you to your room?”

She rolled her eyes and strolled past him. “That *won't* be needed. But I will do
this – meet me in the common room in ten minutes and I'll buy you some hot tea or some
spiced wine to thank you for your help.”

He bowed again as he replied. “It would be an honor.”

This had to stop, or at least get toned down. “The honor is all mine, Darius, but if
you don't drop the hoity toity stuffiness, I'll remove your bollocks and wear them for
earrings.”

She said it in a perfectly monotone voice, pleased that she kept emotion out of it. Darius's eyes widened in shock and she almost laughed as he caught himself wanting to bow again.

"I'm sorry," he muttered. "I wasn't trying to offend you...."

"Oh, do shut up," she laughed. "I was only half joking. I'll meet you in ten minutes."

She walked out the door past him, mildly curious what strange occurrence would happen next.

Arica tossed her old clothes onto her bed and walked back down to the common room. She had promised Darius a drink, and she would keep that promise. He wasn't all that bad looking, and while she wasn't ready for more than pleasant conversation yet so soon after Rytor, he could prove to be a nice diversion for an hour or so. They could drink and talk, then she could thank him for his help and bid him good night before she returned to her bed – alone.

The fire was growing a bit dimmer as the hours grew later, so she had to squint to make out Darius sitting near the hearth with two mugs on the table in front of him. She

snorted and started towards the table, wondering idly if she would even get the chance to pay for the drinks.

He rose and smiled as she approached, thankfully dispensing with the bowing he seemed so willing to give earlier. He gestured for her to take a seat at the chair across from him and waited until she was settled before resuming his own seat.

“These are paid for already, aren’t they?” she asked unceremoniously.

He colored slightly as he nodded. “I was taught it wasn’t proper to allow a young lady you just met to buy the drinks.”

She smiled at his response and sighed wistfully. “That’s sweet, Darius. It’s nice to see that you remember the manners your mother taught you, but I’m no lady. I’m just... well... I’m just *me*. Plain old Arica Treamon.”

He returned the smile and sipped at his wine. “That may be, but you look like a lady to me, so I feel obligated to treat you as one.”

Her barked laugh sprayed the mouthful of wine she had just taken across the table. Now it was her turn to blush.

“Sorry about that,” she mumbled. She wiped her mouth on her sleeve and took another drink.

“No need to be sorry,” he replied smoothly, using a leftover napkin to wipe up the liquid. “What brings you to Whitebridge?”

“I should ask the same of you. It’s a long way from here to Saldea.”

He nodded and smiled again. “Almost as far as from Arad Doman.”

She returned the smile, mildly impressed that he had guessed where she was from as well. But that only made sense when you considered that the two nations were neighbors to each other. They might not know much about each other’s customs – leastwise she didn’t know much of Saldean customs – but they would have no problem recognizing each other through accents and mannerisms. At least someone from northern Arad Doman would have no trouble; the southerners probably only recognized Taraboners, and that so they would know who to try and kill.

The look on his face indicated that he was still waiting on an answer from her before he said anything else. She took another drink of the wine before sighing and giving him a serious look for a change.

“You saved my life, so I guess I should be honest with you, at least,” she began.
“Do you want the long story or the short one?”

“Time isn’t a concern for me if it isn’t for you,” he replied. “Tell whichever one you wish.”

She sighed again as she tried to decide exactly what to tell him. She wanted to be honest, but there were some things that she felt were best left out.

“The short one then. It’s painful to discuss, so I’d like to avoid the details.”

He nodded and motioned for her to continue.

“I lost two people who were very close to me within the space of a year,” she said after taking a deep breath. “I guess I was looking to get away for a while and Caemlyn seemed as good a place to get away to as any.”

With a concerned look he reached across and placed one of his hands on hers.

Light, she thought. If I didn’t have Rytor so fresh on my mind, that tingle would be intriguing!

“I’m sorry for your loss,” he was saying, sympathy shining in his eyes. “Were they family?”

She considered that before answering. “Of a sort.”

He took that as enough response and leaned back in his chair. She wanted to tell him not to pull his hand away, but knew how that would sound. Besides, how could she think of things like that while she was talking about Rytor!

Arica shook her head to clear it of the improper thoughts and looked at her companion again.

“Now it’s your turn,” she said, trying to put a touch of playfulness into her voice to dispel the solemn mood that was attempting to cover the table and its occupants.

“True,” he said with a smile. “My story is fairly simple. I grew up in Saldea and never really ventured out of it except for a short journey into the Blight when I was training with the armsmen. I just wanted to see what all was out in the world that I hadn’t been exposed to in the Borderlands.”

She smiled and gestured towards the bathing chambers. “Considering what happened back there, I should be thankful you have a wandering spirit.”

“Was that a ‘thank you’,” he asked bemusedly. “Because I don’t recall getting one at the time. Of course, you were just getting over almost being assaulted, and getting out of your bath, as well....”

“I’m sorry,” she replied, rolling her eyes. “I was distracted. Thank you for helping me out. That probably would have been much uglier had you not barged into the women’s baths.”

He stammered for a moment, trying to find words to express his apology at seeing her naked. The blush that rose quickly to his cheeks was enough to make Arica’s night.

“I’m joking,” she laughed. “But did anyone ever tell you that you’re pretty cute when you’re embarrassed?”

The blush on Darius’s cheeks deepened, and he seemed to be having a harder time coming up with a response.

She was on a roll now. “It’s true! Why, I could just cuddle you up and rock you in my arms for a bit if you were to keep that blush up!”

Arica was so involved in teasing her companion that she never noticed the man who was walking up to the table until he spoke.

“What is it with you and Domani?” the man asked Darius, a wicked grin splitting his face. “Am I not enough of a burr in your saddle?”

She looked over at the newcomer and felt her breath catch in her throat. The man was obviously a Domani, but for some strange reason he looked familiar for more than just the cultural reasons.

“Good evening,” he said, turning to face her and ignoring Darius completely. “It’s always nice to see a fellow countryman – countrywoman in this case, I guess. You can call me Ryle.”

Arica’s mind spun as she tried to reason out why Ryle seemed so familiar. After he pulled up another chair and joined them sitting at the table, she studied his face, seeming as though she were just paying close attention to what he was saying.

Ryle’s eyes were a slightly darker shade of blue than her own, and his normally dark blonde hair was bleached by the sun to a lighter hue that hung to his shoulders. He was slim, barely any hint of musculature underneath his finely cut shirt. He carried himself with the slight air of nobility, though he also seemed to be trying to cover that. His lips were curled slightly into a smirky grin, something he managed to maintain even while speaking.

“So where’s Rurhic?” Darius asked.

Ryle shrugged and pointed at the ceiling, eliciting a slight nod from the other man. He turned his attention to Arica, the question of where this Rurhic person was apparently answered as much as he could.

“And who might you be?” he asked her evenly.

She jerked slightly out of her thoughts and answered quickly. “I’m Arica. Do I know you from somewhere?”

The man shook his head slowly, the grin never fading from his lips. “Not to my knowledge, and I’m sure I’d remember you if we had met before.”

She ignored the hint of Domani charm that permeated his statement and gave a non-committal grunt. Her eyes narrowed as she studied the other Domani carefully.

“I didn’t say we’d met,” she said. “I just think you look familiar.”

Suddenly something clicked into place in her mind: an image of the King with the Council of Merchants during one of her visits to Bandar Eban. There was a young man there, standing with the Council and snickering at the King....

“You’re the Prince of Arad Doman,” she exclaimed, shock evident in her tone.

Darius turned to look at his companion, an amused look crossing his face. Ryle laughed.

“Not quite,” he replied once his laughing fit was over. “My father is a Councilman, not the bloody King himself.”

Arica nodded, only slightly relieved that the man was not related to the Domani King. She assumed he would still have some of the stuffed shirt mentality of a noble, but if he left that life, there might be hope for him yet.

“Why did you leave then?” she asked. “I would have guessed that you had anything you could ever want.”

“I did and I didn’t,” Ryle answered cryptically, seeming to think the answer he gave was answer enough. “I made a few discoveries about myself, and decided to see the world before telling Father about them.”

Arica was not a fool. It was easy enough to read between the lines on that statement: he had discovered something about himself that his father would disapprove of, so he ran away from home. What that discovery could be was a more intriguing question. Maybe he got some pretty little peasant girl pregnant. It was a puzzle she would

have liked to have had more time to unravel. There was a certain way she had learned to ask about things that men didn't want to tell, but it took a great deal of careful wording in her talks, as well as many days to do it. Go about it too quickly and the man realized what you were doing. Slowly and methodically, however, they came to trust you and open up more and more as time went by.

But time was something she doubted she would have with this man. Even Darius was holding secrets she would have enjoyed learning, if for no other reason than to have information she could possibly use against him if the case called for it. She would have to be content to have a few more moments of company for the night, and then she would probably never see them again.

The small group sat and talked and laughed for another hour before Arica noticed the difficulty she was having holding her eyes open. With a yawn she asked if they could meet again for breakfast before they all headed out to go their separate ways, and the men agreed. They even promised to introduce her to the mysterious Rurhic they kept talking about. He would be something she would not have believed seeing was all they would tell her at the moment.

She said her good nights and wandered towards the stairs that would lead to her room. Her sense of balance dulled by the wine, she found she could only mount the stairs as long as she leaned heavily against the wall as she ascended. Once she finally made it to her room, her small bed called to her like the embrace of a long lost lover. She collapsed

into it and immediately slipped into a sleep so deep the nightmares that plagued her for so long had no chance to invade.

Ryle sat staring after the young girl as she stumbled up the stairs. He shook his head as he swirled the remainder of his wine in its mug before downing it. She was definitely not what he expected to meet on this journey. But then he never expected to meet anyone like Darius or Rurhic, either.

“Did you know her?” Darius asked. “For a moment there, it looked like...”

“No,” Ryle responded, cutting him off and pulling himself back to the moment. “No, I don’t know her, but she does look like a description I saw before leaving of a girl that was suspected of killing some pompous armsman commander in a nowhere village back home. Not that anyone would have minded; from what I remember he was sent into the thick of the fighting on the Almouth Plain in the hopes that he wouldn’t come back. He was always too stubborn to do as they hoped though; he always came back.”

Darius nodded thoughtfully. “Think she’s got a price on her head?”

The other man was shaking his head before the question was completely out.

“I don’t know,” he said. “The reports came in just before I left. I’m almost sure some of the commander’s men would put a price on her, but I don’t know what came out of any official investigations. Light! I don’t even know for sure it was her.”

“I guess it doesn’t matter anyway,” Darius mused. “I won’t turn her in after I saved her life, anyway.”

That caught Ryle’s interest.

“You never did tell me how the two of you met,” he said. “So let’s hear it.”

Darius related how he had saved Arica from the loudmouths in the bathing chambers, glaring irritably at his companion as the man snickered over the thought of Darius being in the same room as that young Domani while she was naked.

“No wonder she was raking you over the coals,” he laughed.

“Oh, do shut up,” Darius grumbled. “Go on up to bed. I’m going to let Rurhic know to be down for breakfast in the morning.”

Ryle got up and ambled to the stairs, his laughter echoing back to the other man rising from the table. Darius shook his head and walked to the door to the inn.

The crisp air blowing in off of the river sliced through his cloak like a blade. With an involuntary shiver, he turned down the narrow alley that ran beside the inn. Glancing around and seeing nothing, he looked up towards the roof and narrowed his eyes, searching for his friend he knew was up there somewhere.

“Rurhic,” he hissed towards the shadows. “Rurhic, are you up there?”

“No, I’m down here,” came a soft voice from directly behind him.

Darius fought the urge to jump and carefully removed his hand from the hilt of his sword where it had crept at the first word. He turned slowly, straining his eyes to make out the form of the tall man shrouded in the darkness.

“Come in for breakfast in the morning,” he told the dark shape. “We’re going to have a guest at our table.”

“I know,” the shape responded simply. “I heard.”

The man shook his head at the response. “How long were you listening?”

“Since I arrived back.”

“That’s helpful,” Darius muttered. “And when was that?”

“When the woman was causing your face to turn red,” Rurhic responded. “That seems to happen easily to you wetlanders.”

Color bloomed in Darius’s cheeks again, this time for a reason other than just embarrassment.

“I shall maintain a watch from the roof,” the shape said, already climbing the wall again.

“You do that.”

Darius turned away and headed back to the front of the inn. His traveling companions certainly had been a surprise, and he wondered mildly when the surprises would stop.

II – THE OFFER IS MADE

Arica stretched and adjusted the strap of her pack over her shoulder as she descended the stairs to the common room. She had ended up sleeping much later than she intended, so it was closer to lunchtime than breakfast by the time she made her way down. She wasn’t expecting to find her companions from the night before still waiting, so she was shocked when she saw them sitting with another newcomer beside the fire, sipping on what looked like cups of hot tea.

The newcomer must be the Rurhic person they kept mentioning last night. He was definitely not what she was expecting. Even sitting down, the man appeared to be well over six feet tall – at least a head taller than Darius, at any rate – with shining red hair and steely grey eyes. He seemed quite uncomfortable sitting in a chair, twisting and turning every few seconds.

“Look who finally decided to join the land of the living,” Ryle said with a smile as he noticed her approaching. “Good morning, Arica. Or should I say ‘good afternoon’ instead?”

She returned the smile and took the remaining available seat.

“Sorry,” she muttered. “I guess I was more exhausted than I thought.”

“You had a long and adventurous night,” Darius replied. “It’s no surprise that you needed some extra sleep.”

Arica nodded slightly, mildly annoyed at the protective tone that filled his voice. Her eyes shifted to the newcomer once again.

“You must be Rurhic,” she said.

The tall man nodded once, no expression whatsoever showing on his face.

After a moment of quiet, Arica scratched her chin. “Don’t talk much, do you?”

“Only when I must,” the man replied evenly.

“Don’t take offense, Arica,” Darius interjected. “He doesn’t mean anything by it.”

“He’s just afraid one of these Andorans will notice too much of the Aiel in his accent,” Ryle offered with a smile.

Arica did not answer; she merely stared at Darius with a look of pure irritation.

“Darius,” she said softly. “I appreciate what you did for me yesterday. But despite what you may think, I am not some soft little child. I’ve seen my fair share of bloodshed, and can do quite well to take care of myself. I don’t need some man to coddle me and protect me from the evils of the world. You will stop that, or I will turn *you* into a woman.”

Rurhic chuckled at that. “She handles herself like *Far Dareis Mai*. You would do well to treat her with caution, my friend.”

She turned away from Darius’s shocked face to regard Rurhic again.

“Are you Aiel?” she asked cautiously.

He nodded proudly.

If there was one thing she never expected to see, it was a real living Aiel on this side of the ridge of mountains called the Dragonwall that separated the mainland from the wasteland known as the Aiel Waste. What she knew about them she could write on the head of a pin.

“What is this Far Dares My?” she asked.

“*Far Dareis Mai* translates to ‘Maidens of the Spear’ in the wetlander tongue,” he answered. “They are a warrior sept in Aiel society, one of the most ferocious, and one that accepts only women.”

“I like that idea,” Arica responded enthusiastically. “Maybe you could teach me about them while I have something to eat.”

Rurhic actually smiled. “I will do what I can.”

“Great,” Ryle muttered to Darius, who was still staring at Arica with confused frustration. “Just what the world needs. A Domani who thinks like an Aiel.”

The four were still sitting around the table, talking and laughing, several hours later when the old man came in. Darius had sulked for some time before Arica finally apologized for being so harsh. She told him she didn't want to be coddled, and that was just something he would have to work on, but she didn't want him to think that meant he couldn't speak to her at all. He had huffed about that for a bit before finally loosening up a little more and enjoying the company again.

Rurhic noticed the man approaching the table first, leaping to his feet in an instant, his hand reaching towards the short-handled spear that rested against his back. The old man stopped quickly and threw his hand up in a defensive manner.

“Hold, good Aiel,” he said. “I mean you and your friends no harm.”

The Aiel continued to eye the man warily. Darius finally spoke up to address the old gentleman.

“Can we help you, sir?” he asked.

The man nodded. “I hope so, lad. May I sit with you for a moment?”

At a look from Ryle, Rurhic stepped aside and motioned to the chair he had just vacated. The old man mumbled his thanks as he took the seat.

“My name is Adan Corl. I am a small merchant on my way to Four Kings to go home after a long trip. I’ve been downriver in Murandy, you see, since I thought they might have need of my wares, so....”

“We don’t need a long tale, Master Corl,” Ryle said impatiently. “Get to the point.”

“Yes, well,” Adan stammered, obviously taken aback by the younger man’s bluntness. “I’ve noticed an increase in the number of brigands on my return trip. I’m sure the Queen’s Guard have been doing their best, mind, but there are still more than I am used to. Perhaps the way winter has held on has driven men to extremes. I’m sure Queen Morgase could set things right with little effort, once she is able to....”

“The point,” Arica broke in. “Get to the point.”

“Ah, yes, I do seem to ramble a bit don’t I? I just don’t get much chance to talk out there on the road. Some of the other merchants are friendly enough I suppose, but they....”

Rurhic cleared his throat behind the man, causing him to emit a startled squeak before blurting out what he wanted with them.

“I, ah, need some bodyguards to see me safely home,” he said in a rush. “And I hoped I could hire the four of you for the task.”

Darius and Ryle exchanged surprised glances as Arica raised her eyebrows slightly. Rurhic showed no reaction to the request, but Arica was sure she noticed him shift his stance slightly when the old man blurted that out.

“And just how much do you intend to pay us for this task,” Darius asked suspiciously.

“Well, ah, how about five marks a day plus meals? Each, of course,” Corl spluttered.

“Give us a moment to discuss this, Master Corl,” Ryle asked.

“Oh, yes, of course,” the man said as he rose. “I’ll be at that table over there when you reach a decision.”

Once he was out of earshot, Rurhic squatted next to the table as the other three looked at each other questioningly.

“Well,” Ryle began carefully. “I guess the first thing we need to figure out is whether or not Arica is willing to join us for a while.”

Darius nodded thoughtfully. “The old man did make the offer to the four of us, so it’s only fair that we ask you, I guess.”

Arica leaned back in her chair and scratched her head. She had been on her own for a long time now. It might do her some good to have people traveling with her for a change.

“Well,” she began slowly. “Four Kings is on the way to Caemlyn, so I’ll make a deal with you. I’ll go with you to Four Kings so this old man can have his bodyguards if you’ll come to Caemlyn with me.”

Rurhic chuckled. “You remind me of home, wetlander. I’ll come with you to Caemlyn.”

“Two Domani alone in Caemlyn with coin in their pockets. That has some serious potential for fun,” Ryle mused. “Why bloody not?”

“You wouldn’t be alone, Ryle,” Darius responded carefully. “But this does have some promise.” He placed his hand to his chin and looked at Arica thoughtfully. “I guess

the question is whether or not you'll have us with you that far, Arica. If you will, I'll go, too."

Ryle snickered as Arica glared daggers at the man.

"Is it in your nature?" she asked through clenched teeth.

Darius looked confused. "Is what in my nature?"

"This bloody pompousness. *I* asked *you*, you muscle-brained fool, so of course I'll 'have you that far'."

Rurhic stamped his fist against the ground as Ryle dissolved into laughter. Color rose in Darius's cheeks, and Arica found herself marveling again at how easy it was for her to twist this man's tongue around.

"So, since we're in agreement on going on to Caemlyn after Four Kings, do we take the old man up on his offer?" she asked sweetly, staring directly at Darius as he fumed.

"We could use the coin," Ryle mentioned to Darius through his remaining giggles. "Besides, how hard could it be to defend one old merchant?"

Darius seemed to regain some measure of his composure as he turned to Rurhic.

“What do you think?”

The Aiel shrugged noncommittally. “I came across the Dragonwall to learn about the Wetlands and the people in them. You have befriended me and I have traveled with you. I go where you go.”

With obvious reluctance, Darius turned to Arica.

“I spent the last of my money making a deal for my room last night,” she said before he had a chance to ask anything. He seemed like he was beaten enough for one day. “Earning some coin while getting closer to where I want to go at the same time sounds like a dream come true for me.”

Darius nodded and rose from the table, crossing the room to where the old merchant sat sipping at a cup of tea. He returned a few moments later and resumed his seat.

“He wants to leave tomorrow at first light,” he reported. “He has also offered to pay for rooms for us tonight.”

“In that case,” Arica said, leaping to her feet, “I believe I’ll check out this town before it gets dark.”

She motioned to her pack on the floor beside the table. “Darius, could you be a dear and put that in whatever room I get for the night?”

Rurhic stood, hiding the other man’s shocked expression from her sight. “I would like to join you, if I may,” he said. “Perhaps you could tell me of your travels.”

Arica smiled. “I’d like that,” she said simply. With a quick smile at Ryle and a quick wink at a still-shocked Darius, she led the way out of the inn.

It was well after dark when she returned to the inn. Rurhic had explained his dislike for being indoors before ducking down the narrow alleyway beside the stone building so he could make his way to the roof unseen. He had drawn a good many startled glances as they had walked through the streets, a fact that she could identify with easily. She had only heard rumors of the Aiel before now, and was still adjusting to knowing one personally, much less seeing one in the flesh.

She knew from the tales the visitors to her village had told that the Aiel had once crossed the Dragonwall almost twenty years ago and lain siege to the city of Cairhein. From what she had heard, the Aiel War had been extremely savage and bloody, so it was no surprise that people looked at one of them wandering through the streets of their home with fear and distrust. She had been a bit nervous herself at first, but the more she talked

with Rurhic about her journey here and his own, the more she had come to like the man. He was definitely intriguing, and not at all the savage she would have believed him to be.

Her other newfound companions were an interesting pair as well. Ryle was trying hard not to be a noble, even though it was in his blood and had probably been hammered into him throughout his childhood. At least it was nice to have a fellow countryman along with her. It helped to alleviate the homesickness that kept threatening to overcome her from time to time. Darius was another matter altogether. He was assuredly fun to torment, and gave her the perfect opportunity to practice the skills her mother and the other women she had grown up around had taught her almost from her crib. If she could only find a way to break through the stiff demeanor he carried, he could prove to be a very nice man.

She stepped into the common room and blinked to adjust her eyes to the dim light that emanated from the fireplace. She could just make out Darius sitting by the fire sipping something from the large mug he was holding. He glanced over as she entered, his eyes alert for any trouble that might come through.

“Enjoy your day?” he asked, a note of sarcasm entering his voice.

Arica looked at him quizzically. This tone was something new for him, and she wasn't sure she liked it.

“Yes, actually, I did,” she replied as she approached the table. “How about you?”

The man actually scowled. “Oh, it was a lovely day. I was so happy the rest of you ran off to have fun. That meant I was free to stay and negotiate the remainder of the terms of our deal with that old merchant. Ryle left shortly after you and Rurhic, so that left me all alone to think for a bit. After playing manservant and placing yours and Ryle’s packs in your rooms, that is.”

“Blood and bloody ashes! What brought this hostility on all of the sudden?”

“Am I being hostile, m’lady? My apologies. Light knows I shouldn’t be hostile to you. Just because every attempt I’ve made at being civil to you has been met with your berating me and trying to embarrass me for some bloody reason. I only tried to help you out, after all.”

“A fact for which I have already thanked you,” Arica exclaimed.

“True. You did thank me, just before telling me I was pompous. Perhaps I should have waited to see how pompous you thought I was after I let those fools do as they wished with you.”

Arica stared at him, the anger within her threatening to boil over. He was right, of course. She had done nothing but give him a hard time since he saved her from those

men. But she was only trying to get him to relax, and treat her like a person, not some fragile doll. But for him to say that...!

“You’re a flaming arse,” she screamed. “Light take you and your bloody good deeds!”

She spun on her heel and stormed towards the stairs, mildly annoyed that she didn’t find out which room was hers before attempting a dramatic exit.

Darius sighed as he watched the girl storm away. That last bit had slipped out by mistake. He didn’t really mean it, and immediately regretted saying it. But now was not the time to apologize for it. If he tried to call her back now she would only cause a bigger scene than she already had.

She was definitely not like any of the other Domani women he had met during his lifetime. She was much stronger-willed for one thing. If it ever came down to a fist fight, she would probably do some damage to him through sheer intensity before he managed to take her down. One thing was for sure – if she was that different from most Domani, he would have to keep an eye on her. He was willing to wager that she wasn’t born and raised that way – something happened to give that cat some claws. Whatever it was, it couldn’t have been good, and he had to wonder how long it would be before that caught

up with her. If it caught up with her while she was traveling with him, it could turn out to be very bad indeed.

He shook his head and took another drink of the thick ale. The last thing he wanted to worry about on this journey was a troubled young woman. He hoped to get away for a bit, take his mind off of the past so he could begin to heal. But it seemed this would not be anywhere near as simple as he had once thought it would be.

Maybe she wouldn't come down in the morning; maybe she would just up and leave after that outburst. He felt that would probably be for the best, since if he was having this hard of a time trusting her, things could go very bad a crucial moment.

What puzzled him and kept him up into the small hours considering was that if her leaving would be for the best, why was he hoping so desperately that she would stay?

Arica slammed the door to her room shut and threw herself onto the bed. The nerve of that man to say that! She was pretty sure that it was something said out of frustration and anger, and that he didn't really mean it, but to say it all was the lowest blow he could have struck against her. She glanced over at her pack, sitting neatly on the small chair beside the bed, and considered leaving right now – grabbing that pack and heading towards Caemlyn as fast as she could, hoping to at least get to a secluded area before she had to stop and sleep.

A soft tapping at her door caused those thoughts to dissipate. That was probably Darius, coming up here to bow and scrape and try to make amends for what he said.

She rose and crossed to the door in two long strides. Taking a deep breath, she steeled herself and threw the door open wide.

“What under the Light do *you* want?” she bellowed.

Ryle raised his hands defensively and took a step back.

“Hey, I just heard your door and assumed you were back. I just wanted to chat for a bit.”

She colored slightly.

“Sorry about that,” she murmured. “I thought you were someone else.”

The man smiled his crooked smile. “Since I’m not Darius, can I come in?”

Arica returned the smile with a genuine one of her own. “You can come in. How did you know?”

He entered and crossed to the chair, placing the pack gently on the floor before sitting down.

“He is in some kind of mood, isn’t he?” he asked. “I tried to talk to him after I got back and he just kept asking me if he was being too pompous for me, too. I think you struck a nerve there.

“Tell me about it,” she replied as she shut the door and took a seat on the bed. “He tore into me like I was the bloody Dark One come to take him to dinner.”

Ryle laughed.

“That’s pretty good,” he said. “Seriously, though, don’t let Darius get to you. He’s got some problems that he’s trying to deal with and he’s having a hard time with them. He doesn’t mean anything by it. Remember, he was raised being taught what connivers Domani women were. You are a Domani woman, I believe, unless my eyesight is going bad on me.”

“What kind of problems?”

“Women problems, but beyond that I have no idea,” he replied with a shrug. “He didn’t offer and I didn’t ask.”

“That explains a lot,” Arica mumbled. “So, do you still want me to travel with you?”

“Sure. I think it’ll be nice to have a fellow conniver along.”

Arica had to laugh at that. She and Ryle talked for a bit longer about the journey ahead and their plans after it. When he finally said good night and left, she picked up her pack and looked at it for a long while. Finally, she put it back on the chair and disrobed for bed. She would stay with them for a while longer yet, and if Darius had a problem with it, she would deal with him on her own time. She was through letting someone else dictate how she should live her life.

She was Arica Treamon d’Oronarico, and the Dark One could take Darius for his toy for all she cared. He would not control her.

But to her amazement, her dreams were filled with him instead of her past for a change.

III – THE JOURNEY BEGINS

Arica reached out to caress the neck of the bay mare she had been given to ride when her little group met with Master Corl at first light. She was still both amazed and pleased that the old man had given her a horse to use during her duty to him. She had come so far on foot that riding a horse again was liable to make her quite sore tonight, but

in the long run the pain that had seemed to become a permanent part of her feet and calves would have a chance to heal and go away. For that she was more than willing to deal with aching thighs for a couple of days.

They were almost ready to leave at last. Behind her, she could see Darius and Ryle helping the merchant hitch his small wagon back up to his two horses. Darius had avoided her all morning except for handing the reins of her already-saddled horse to her. He had not spoken to her at all, not even when she quietly and meekly thanked him for the horse. Either he was still angry beyond words at her, or too ashamed to say anything; she was having a hard time figuring out which.

Rurhic stood off to the side and a little ahead of her. He had insisted on not riding a horse, stating that his own legs were good enough for him. The plan was for him to scout ahead while they rode, so he could alert them in advance should trouble be waiting. How he was going to stay ahead of the horses she did not know, but if he said he could, she was inclined to believe him.

Her horse pawed the ground briefly, as anxious as she was to get on with this journey. The mare had been cooped up in the stabled for longer than it liked and she had been in one place longer than she would have liked. She wanted to hurry up and get to Caemlyn so she could explore and decide if that truly was where she could begin her new life.

Movement to her left brought her attention back to the here and now. Ryle rode up beside her and smiled.

“You ready?” he asked. “We’ve got front guard. Master happy is bringing up the rear.”

Arica snorted at that. “He’s still at it this morning I noticed.”

“Actually,” Ryle replied. “He’s ashamed of himself. He’s embarrassed to say anything to you.”

At least she now knew which of the two possibilities it was, even though it was still surprising to her.

“We’re ready now,” Master Corl called out. “Lead the way.”

Rurhic nodded and raced off, his pace making it evident that Arica’s earlier concerns about him keeping pace with the horses was unfounded. She and Ryle took off slowly, letting the horses get warmed up before raising them to a steady trot. A creak from behind them indicated the merchant’s wagon beginning to move as well. Arica could only assume that Darius has started forward as well, since the un-oiled wheels of Master Corl’s wagon drowned out any other sound from behind them.

It was only a few moments after they started out that Whitebridge began shrinking into the background. The city was decently sized from what Arica had seen during her explorations, but was nowhere near as large as she had expected. The woods began creeping up beside them and the sounds of the Arinelle faded to the chirping of what few birds braved the still-crisp air that should have long since been replaced by the beginning warmth of spring.

The day passed quickly. Arica found Ryle to be a pleasant travel companion, and truly enjoyed the laughs they shared along the road to Four Kings. He had a quick smile and a quicker wit that filled the otherwise uneventful moments with friendly banter. After journeying so far on her own, she had forgotten how nice it was to have someone to talk to and help pass the time. Even Master Corl turned out to be much nicer than she had originally thought. Rurhic came back on occasion to report all clear ahead, and then disappeared back into the distance. Darius remained behind the wagon, seemingly lost in his own thoughts.

As the sun drifted low over the horizon, Master Corl called out to stop for the night. Arica dismounted and tied her mare to a nearby tree before walking back to the rest of the group to help strike camp. Darius continued to avoid her, she noticed with a grin. That was something she would have to fix before the night was over.

Rurhic had come back shortly after nightfall with three decently sized rabbits for supper. Master Corl exclaimed over them and even insisted on being the one to cook them after Rurhic and Darius had cleaned them. For her part, Arica set the water to boil so they could have tea to drink with the meat. She also dug through her pack for some bread and cheese that was left from her own journey. Luckily, there was more than enough to go around.

The five of them ate well and talked amongst themselves. Once the meal was finished, Rurhic wandered into the woods to make sure nothing slipped up on them and Ryle took Master Corl into the wagon for a couple of games of stones before time to sleep. Arica glanced over at Darius, snorting softly when she saw him staring into the fire to avoid looking at her.

“All right, this has gone on long enough,” she announced as she stood and crossed over to him. “It’s time you and I had a long talk.”

Darius looked up at her and quickly glanced away.

“I need to go get ready to take first watch,” he mumbled, starting to rise.

Arica shoved him back down forcefully.

“It can wait,” she said dangerously. “This can’t.”

He stared back up at her indignantly and started to stand up again, only to have her shove him back a second time.

“You don’t want to talk? Fine,” she shouted. “Then just sit there and keep your flaming mouth shut and listen to me!”

The man sat gaping up at her, the look on his face a cross between amazement and fury. She ignored the look and charged ahead, her voice rising as she did.

“You saved my life, or at the least my body; for that I thanked you and am grateful to you. I seem to have insulted your pride and perhaps *you* personally; for that I’m sorry. I can’t take back what I said, but I can apologize for it, and that’s what I’m doing. But no matter how much you may want to, you can’t just ignore me and treat me as though I don’t even exist. You don’t want me here? Fine! When we get to Four Kings I’ll go my way and you can go yours and that will be the end of it. But for now we are traveling together, whether you like it or not, so the least you can do is how me a little civility and stop acting like such a Light-blinded flaming bloody fool oaf!”

Arica took a deep breath and realized she was leaning into Darius’s face while the man was lying on the ground behind the log he had started out sitting on. She did her best to cover her startled reaction and took a step back away from him. He picked himself up and resumed his seat back on the fallen tree.

“Are you finished?” he asked meekly.

Stunned by the ferocity of her outburst, Arica simply nodded. She didn't trust herself to say anything further at the moment.

“You're right,” Darius continued after seeing her nod. “I was ashamed that I said what I did, and I didn't know how to tell you. I had no right to say it, and I'm sorry I did. Your apology is accepted, so that puts an end to that. Maybe you had a point; maybe you were just being cruel. The reason is not important anymore. And as to whether or not I want you with us – it doesn't really matter what I think. You're here, and that's that.”

Arica opened her mouth to respond only to have him silence her with a look.

“You may think it matters,” he continued. “But in reality, no matter what I think of you, I couldn't just send you off to deal with whatever is out there on your own. True, you have yet to earn my trust, but that doesn't mean that I want to see you dead or worse because we have a personality conflict.”

The man rose and strapped his sword onto his waist.

“Now if you have nothing else to say about it, I have to go take the first watch tonight. Rurhic needs sleep, too, no matter what he seems to think.”

Arica found herself staring at his back as he strode through the camp in the direction Rurhic has disappeared earlier. The man had managed to apologize to her, chastise her, and be protective of her in a matter of a few words. He may not have the best attitude about things, but he had a way with words that she doubted he was even aware of.

She stood and headed over to the wagon, hoping to catch Ryle and Master Corl in between games so she could have some less aggressive conversation before she went to sleep. As she opened the door, she realized her mood had already lightened considerably. Darius might still be a bit stiff, but he was definitely starting to open up more. Maybe she should do the same.

The next day passed much the same as the first except for Darius finally being a bit more sociable towards Arica. He and Ryle actually took turns covering the rear guard of the little procession. They had left the woods behind by the time they started out on the third morning, crossing rolling hills and plains dotted with small farms along the way. Arica was curious why Master Corl did not stop at some of these houses, since the owners looked quite anxious to speak to a merchant of any kind. It was obvious to her that they were the Master Corl was the first merchant of the season to pass their way, yet he ignored them and insisted they continue towards Four Kings.

It was almost midday on their third day of the journey when the men dressed in the uniforms of the Queen's Guard stopped them and things changed drastically.

There were five of them total, four still on their mounts and one standing in front of his with a large roll of parchment in his hand. All five were stocky and well-built, their musculature visible even through the layers of uniform they wore. The uniforms were a bright crimson, with the Lion of Andor clearly emblazoned on their chests. The one on the ground held up a hand as they approached, stopping them in the road.

“Good day, Masters and Mistress,” the man intoned. “By order of the Queen, please stand down and prepare to have your wagon searched.”

Arica's stomach began a slow roll. Something was out of place here, but she was having a hard time identifying what it was. She was sharing the front guard with Darius this morning, and was mildly surprised when he rode forward another step and addressed the guardsman.

“Who are you?” he asked simply.

The guardsman stiffened.

“My name is of no concern to you, good sir. Kindly dismount and hand over your steel until we have completed our search of this wagon.”

Master Corl’s quiet moans were still clearly audible behind them. Arica couldn’t shake the feeling that something was about to happen, and she didn’t think it was going to be very pleasant.

“May I ask what order good Queen Morgana has issued that we submit to your search?” Darius asked.

Arica looked at him strangely. She might not have done much traveling, but even she knew the Queen of Andor was named Morgase, not Morgana. What was he up to?

“The orders of the Queen are of no concern to you, Borderlander,” the guardsman said angrily. “You are in Andor, and it is your duty to obey the Queen’s Guard, not to question them.”

The sinking feeling in Arica’s stomach reached its lowest point as the reality of what the man just said sank in. He didn’t correct Darius’s apparently intentional mistake with the Queen’s name! If he was truly one of the Queen’s Guards, he would have corrected him out of instinct if nothing else.

Darius placed a hand on his sword and stared at the guardsman.

“We will not submit to you. Stand aside and let us pass.”

The guardsman’s eyes widened in shock.

“You are defying the orders of the Queen?” he asked angrily.

Her companion smiled slightly and tightened the grip on the hilt of his sword.

“You’re not representatives of Queen Morgase,” Darius answered carefully.

“Either tell us the truth or be prepared to grab steel if you will not let us pass.”

The guardsman clearly understood that he had been set up. Biting back a reply, he unrolled the parchment and looked from it to Master Corl. With a nod, he tucked the parchment into his belt and reached for his own sword.

“This man is wanted by the Illuminator’s Guild for betrayal of trade secrets,” he announced, pointing at Master Corl. “Release him to us now and no one will be harmed. Resist and we will be forced to take him by any means we can.”

Arica clearly heard Darius swear under his breath. The Illuminator’s Guild was a very secret group of craftsmen and women who designed and made fireworks. Arica had only seen their work once during a ceremony in Bandar Eban, but remembering how

spectacular that display had been, she could understand why they were so careful about guarding their trade secrets. It was rumored that the penalty for betrayal of Guild secrets was death, so she could understand Darius's reaction to this news.

Darius seemed to be struggling to come to a decision on what to do now. Arica looked from him to the now approaching guardsman. Reaching a decision herself, she quickly embraced the Source and dismounted.

“We have sworn our protection to this man,” she called out, halting the guardsman in his tracks. “And we intend to keep that. Who his is or what he has done is of no concern to us. Unless you have proof that he has killed someone, you will not touch him.”

Relief flooded through her as she saw Darius quickly dismount and draw his sword as well. Ryle strode up from behind the wagon, his own sword in his hand. She could just make out Rurhic coming up from behind the guardsmen, a short-handled spear in either hand.

The lead guardsman stared at her in amazement. “Have you lost your senses, child?”

“What she says is true,” Darius replied for her. “If you want this man, you will have to go through us to get him.”

The guardsman turned to his companions and made a sharp gesture with his left hand as he drew his own sword with his right. The other four dropped from their horses, blades already glistening in the midday sun.

“So be it,” the leader said calmly as he charged towards Darius.

Looking back, Arica had a hard time piecing together the order events took place. She pulled flows of air, water, and spirit into herself and wove them together almost out of instinct and threw the weave at one of the other guardsmen, wincing as his body contorted into unnatural angles. As he fell, the ground began to lurch and roll under her feet, throwing her to the ground in a heap.

All around her, the others toppled as well. An immense ball of flame leapt from seemingly nowhere to engulf the leader of the guardsmen as well as the wagon. An afterimage of the flame burned in her eyes until the wagon exploded outward and the world went pure white. She felt herself falling, blinded by the blast, then her head struck a rock and even that white light faded to black.

She regained consciousness slowly, her eyes fluttering to make certain they could see properly again. The back of her head burned, and when she reached back to rub it her

hands encountered a large lump that had risen there. She moaned as she rose, looking around to find her friends.

What she saw looked like a battlefield. There was nothing left of the wagon save for one lone wheel and charred splinters as far as the eye could see. Rurhic stood in the midst of the large pile of ashes that stood where Master Corl's wagon once did, idly poking through it with one of his spears. Darius was just getting up as well, almost tripping over the body of the guardsmen's leader as he did. Ryle was sitting slumped against a tree, a large gash on his forehead trickling blood into his face. The other guardsmen were all scattered about the area, lying motionless on the ground. She looked around for Master Corl, her heart sinking when she finally saw the charred remains of the sweet old man who had hired them to keep him safe.

Arica slowly crossed through the carnage to the old merchant's body. She rolled him over gently and winced at the shock frozen on his face and in his unseeing eyes. With her hand, she carefully closed those glazed brown eyes and muttered a silent prayer for the man. Once that was done, she crossed over to Ryle, who was moaning softly from his place against the tree.

"I guess he really was an Illuminator," he croaked when she knelt down beside him. "That wagon shot fireworks out like nothing I've ever seen."

“All I saw was the explosion,” she responded as she gently touched the cut on his head. “The earthquake made me hit my head. What happened to you?”

He winced at her touch but didn't pull away. “Part of the wagon hit me when it exploded,” he explained. “It looks worse than it is.”

“Can you stand?” she asked.

He responded by reaching up to grab a low-hanging branch and pulling himself upright. He swayed slightly before starting to collapse again. Arica caught him and eased him back down.

“I'll take that as a 'no',” she said dryly. “Hold still and keep your mouth shut.”

Glancing around quickly, she embraced the source and put a hand gently over the cut before channeling. Ryle gasped and arched his back as the weave knitted the flesh back together. She pulled her hand away and he slumped back against the tree, his fingers tracing the smooth skin that was split only a moment before.

“You – you can...,” he stammered, his eyes filled with shock.

“Yes, I can, and I'd appreciate it if you'd keep it between us,” she answered softly. “I don't want to give Darius anything else to use against me.”

He merely nodded, his face a mask of confusion and surprise. She stood and went over to the remains of the wagon where Darius and Rurhic stood talking quietly. They looked up as she approached, both seemingly relieved that she was unharmed except for the bump on her head.

“Master Corl is dead,” she said without preamble. “I found him over there near the guardsmen. It looks like the explosion threw him there.”

Rurhic nodded and went back to poking through the ashes. Darius looked at her with interest before nodding as well.

“I take it you’re all right?” he asked.

She nodded. “And you?”

The man shrugged. “A few scrapes and bruises, but otherwise fine. What happened here?”

Arica tightened her eyes at the accusing tone in his voice. “How should I know? I was knocked out by the blast.”

Darius continued staring at her, his face emotionless.

“Is there anything else you need to tell me?” he asked at last.

The girl snorted at the question. “No, there’s not,” she growled. “Are you trying to blame me for this?”

“I never said that,” he replied smoothly.

“You may as well have.”

He shrugged again. “Believe what you want.”

Her eyes flashing, she spun on her heel and walked over to the old merchant’s body. She knelt down and pulled his coin purse from his belt, mildly amazed it had not been damaged in the fiery blast. She stood and turned back towards the ash pile, coming up short when she discovered Darius’s sword at her chest.

“Just what in the Light do you think you’re doing?” he demanded. “Just because the man is dead doesn’t give us the right to act like common thieves towards him. Unless that was your intent all along, of course, in which case we have a bigger problem.”

Arica glared at the man. “Put that flaming thing down before you hurt someone.”

Darius shook his head and motioned to the coin purse with the tip of the blade.
“You put that down and I’ll consider it.”

Ryle and Rurhic both rushed over, alarm clear on their faces.

“There’s no need for all that,” Ryle told Darius softly. “Put the sword down.”

“She is unarmed,” Rurhic pointed out. “There is no honor in this, Darius Bashere.”

“Where’s the honor in stealing from a dead man?” Darius asked.

Arica exploded.

“Do you really think that of me? I was bringing this to the rest of you so we could retrieve our pay, and maybe give the rest to his family in Four Kings! Or would you rather leave it for brigands to find, and no one get anything that is deserved?”

Darius lowered the sword slowly, the anger draining from his face. Arica tossed the purse to him before turning and storming towards the few remaining horses. She grabbed her pack off of her now-dead mare and strapped it to one of the horses previously owned by the guardsmen. The man opened his mouth to say something, but Rurhic cut him off.

“I claim those animals as spoils of battle,” he told Darius calmly. “And offer one to Arica as a gift for her courage in that battle.”

Darius looked at the Aiel. The other man met his gaze until Darius dropped his eyes and moved to his own horse. He sheathed his sword and swung himself into the saddle. Ryle picked the old merchant’s coin purse up from where Arica had tossed it to the ground and tucked it into his own belt before mounting one of the other horses himself.

“We should be in Four Kings in a few hours,” Darius announced. “Let’s get to it.”

Arica snorted and brought her horse to a fast trot, turning onto the road once more headed towards Four Kings and Caemlyn beyond. Darius might think he was in charge, but she was her own person. She was no thief, and he could drop dead for all of her. She would go to Four Kings and ask Ryle and Rurhic to accompany her to Caemlyn. Darius could go as well, or he could stay. At this point, she really didn’t care which.

IV – FOUR KINGS

It was nearly nightfall by the time they arrived in Four Kings. The town was a bit smaller than Whitebridge, but Arica really didn’t care. It was a step closer to Caemlyn and that was all that mattered to her. She stormed into the inn they agreed to stay at for the night, her gait fully displaying the anger she was feeling.

Darius had tried to apologize on the way here and she had cut him off before he even got started. She told him that once could be a slip of the tongue, but pulling a sword on her and accusing her a thief without cause was another matter altogether. She also told him in a none too polite manner exactly what he could do with his apology and his sword. She had her doubts that it would be physically possible for him to comply, but it made her feel better to say it.

Darius had managed to get into the inn before her, she discovered, when the innkeeper told her that her room and meals were already provided for, as well as a bath whenever she wished to take it. Heat rose in her cheeks as she glanced around the room, looking for Darius. The nerve!

“Is there anything else I can do for you, good mistress?” the innkeeper asked, interrupting her thoughts.

She considered for a moment before answering.

“Actually, there might be,” she said. “Do you have brandy?”

“Yes we do, mistress,” he answered smoothly. “Two variations, in fact. Would you like me to fetch you a cup?”

“No,” she replied. “You can fetch me a bottle of the better of the two.”

The innkeeper spluttered in shock. “That – that will be quite expensive, young lady.”

She reached into her coins and pulled out one of the two remaining gold crowns she carried, slapping it onto the counter as she stared into the man’s eyes.

“Will this cover it?”

The man snatched the coin up and replaced it with a dark bottle. She smiled her thanks as she retrieved it.

“I’ll take that bath now,” she said.

Arica took another long pull from the now half-empty bottle on the floor beside the large copper tub. Her head was spinning a bit, but she didn’t mind. She found that she really couldn’t care less about much of anything in her current state, and that suited her just fine.

She opened her eyes and glanced across the room at the sound of a door opening and closing again. She blinked, trying in vain to get her eyes to focus, but could only

make out a tall, slender shape moving towards her. Finally the shape solidified into Ryle, walking towards her bathtub as if she were sitting in the common room.

“What’re you doin’ here?” she slurred as he transferred her towels and clothes to the floor and took a seat on the small table beside the tub.

“Thought you might like some company,” he replied, holding up a bottle that was an exact duplicate of the one she was currently sipping from. His had more liquid still in it, but that was the only difference as far as she could tell.

She shifted in the tub, unmindful of the fact she was as naked as the day she was born, trying to face him better so they could talk properly. She waited for a moment so the rest of the room could adjust to her new position before taking another drink of the liquor.

“Can I take a guess at what’s bothering you?” Ryle asked after taking a drink of his own.

“S not hard,” she replied. “Light-blinded buffoon.”

“That was going to be my guess, all right.”

Arica tipped the bottle up again, wincing as the tub dug into her back.

“Don’t be too harsh with him,” Ryle continued. “He’s had a hard life.”

“Thass no ‘scuse,” she mumbled angrily. “He still shunt act like that.”

Ryle shrugged and took another drink.

“Maybe you’re right,” he said. “But you also have to remember that you haven’t exactly been open about your past. Combine that with the fact that he’s known you for less than a week and you’re a Domani woman as well, and you can’t really expect him to trust you very much yet.”

Arica attempted to consider this. Her mind was a bit too foggy to allow her to consider much, but she tried anyway. Finally she gave up and just decided to believe that Ryle was right. The man had tried to apologize earlier and she wouldn’t let him.

“K,” she muttered thickly. “I’ll forgive ‘im.”

She twisted again, trying to get the edge of the tub out of her back. Ryle snickered and she turned to stare at him as he grinned drunkenly.

“C’mere,” she insisted. “I gotta tell you sump’in.”

The man leaned forward, teetering on the edge of the table he was using for a seat. An idea flashed through Arica's mind and she grinned before grabbing him by the collar, yanking backwards as hard as she could. Ryle had time to give a startled yelp before he hit the water with a massive splash.

"You're wet," Arica giggled as he jerked his head out of the water, sputtering and shaking his head wildly. He stared at her for a moment before joining in with her laughter. The two clinked their bottles together and drank deeply, enjoying the moment of levity.

Arica awoke slowly, her head screaming at every minute motion. The sunlight shining through the window felt like daggers piercing her eyes. It took a moment for her to realize she was staring at a wooden floor. She sat up slowly, reaching for her head in a vain attempt to keep the room from spinning as she did so. She leaned back against the headboard with her eyes shut tight, struggling to both keep her head from exploding and to remember what in the Light happened last night.

She opened her eyes a fraction and stared down at herself. She found herself quite confused at the brown dress she was wearing. It was old and worn, but more importantly, it was not hers. She had no idea where this dress came from. She pulled the bodice out enough to see down the dress and caught her breath at the sight of nothing underneath it except her skin.

What in the Light did I do? I remember drinking with Ryle, and then.... I don't know what happened then!

Ignoring the pain that shot through her head, she looked around the room, relaxing slightly when she didn't see the other Domani anywhere. That did little to actually answer her questions, but it did make her feel a bit more at ease. She didn't feel sore, and that eased her mind a bit more as well.

She carefully rose and crossed the room to her pack against the wall. She looked inside and found her shift there, as well as the clothes she had taken down to the baths the night before. She wasn't sure how they got there, but at least she hadn't lost them. She changed as quickly as her headache would allow and slung the pack over her shoulder. She paused at the door to the hall, sure she had heard a faint moan coming from the room. When it wasn't repeated, she exited the room and made her way to the common room.

Ryle slowly crawled out from under the bed, wondering idly why his mouth felt so dry. As he rose, he realized there appeared to be a sock stuffed into it. He pulled the sock out and stared at it. It wasn't one of his, but then this wasn't his room, either. He thought he had heard moaning while he was coming to under that bed, but the room was empty now.

He carefully made his way to his own room and changed clothes before heading down to the common room. If nothing else, it had apparently been an interesting night.

Arica stumbled back into the inn and sat down heavily at the nearest table. One sniff of the breakfast that was being served had proven to be too much for her fragile stomach this morning, causing her to make a mad dash for the front door. At least she felt a little better now that she had emptied some of the alcohol from her system. Her mouth tasted like a horse's arse, but her head had ceased its throbbing and withdrawn to a dull ache.

She returned the sympathetic smile of the barmaid who brought her a cup of hot tea and sipped it carefully. The tea tasted horrible, but after she rinsed her mouth with it, the next drink was considerably better. She glanced up as Ryle slowly descended the stairs, leaning heavily on the wall once he was down. He looked around the room and she held up a hand so he could see her.

He crossed the room slowly and took a seat across from her.

"I feel horrible," he said softly.

"I know the feeling," she agreed. "Look, the last thing I remember is the two of us drinking while I was having my bath light night."

“Me, too,” he replied.

“Well, I guess what I’m getting to is... well... did we...?”

“I have no idea.”

She nodded slightly, not wanting to jar her head too much yet. “Well, if we did, it was just because we had been drinking....”

“Of course!” he agreed quickly. “We’re just becoming friends, and....”

“...we wouldn’t want to...”

“...right!”

The two stared at each other before smiling faintly and glancing away.

Darius and Rurhic joined Arica and Ryle in the common room not long after they had finished their talk. Arica glanced over at Darius and smiled faintly. The man looked at her with a puzzled expression before smiling back.

“I’m sorry,” he said gently. “I shouldn’t have done what I did to you.”

“It’s okay,” she replied. “You don’t trust me, but I can hardly blame you for that. Just remember that I’m not a thief and I wouldn’t steal from friends even if I was.”

The man nodded and turned to the others.

“We can leave whenever you’re ready. We still have about three days’ ride to Caemlyn, so the sooner we get going, the sooner we can get there.”

“I shall go on ahead,” Rurhic said as he rose from his crouch beside the table. “This town makes me uneasy, so I will be glad to be out of it.”

Ryle snorted. “You’re really going to hate Caemlyn if half the stories I’ve heard of its size are true.”

“Perhaps,” the Aiel replied. “But I did not come to the Wetlands expecting to find places I enjoyed. He Who Comes with the Dawn will not be easy to find outside of cities, so it is to cities I must go.”

Arica glanced at him, her interest sparked.

“Who is this person?” she asked. “I’ve never heard you explain why you came across the Dragonwall.”

Rurhic resumed his crouch and took a deep breath.

“I am an Aiel warrior, an *algai’d’siswai*, but I have studied much of our prophesy as well. The ancient prophesies speak of a man called He Who Comes with the Dawn, a man who will be the *car’a’carn* – the chief of chiefs. He will unite the Aiel and break them, and lead them back across the Dragonwall. From the prophesies, I believe he will be found in the Wetlands before taking his place as the head of the Aiel. People in the Wetlands have prophesies about this man as well, only they call him the Dragon.”

“The Dragon!” Arica exclaimed. “But that’s just a legend. A story of the man who lived before the Breaking. If I remember right, he was the one who broke the world.”

Rurhic nodded. “True, but the prophesies say he will be reborn in the time of greatest need, and will break the world anew. They say he will be born of the ancient blood and raised by the old blood, born of a maiden wedded to no man. We have *Far Dareis Mai*, the maidens of a spear, and our prophesies say he will be the son of one of their number.

“We crossed the mountains you call the Dragonwall almost twenty years ago and fought in what you Wetlanders call the Aiel War. If he was to be born on the slopes of

Dragonmount by a Maiden of the Spear, that would have been the best time for that prophesy to be fulfilled, so I believe he is here, walking amongst the other Wetlanders, waiting for the proper time to reveal himself. I wish to be there to see it.”

Arica considered this, waiting for it to sink in before she spoke again.

“What if it is just a legend?” she asked. “What if you never find him? Would you feel as though your journey was in vain?”

The Aiel shook his head. “No. It is the seeking that gives me meaning. The finding will be the reward at the end, but if I did not seek, I could not hope to find.”

Even though the answer was a bit cryptic, Arica thought she understood. He would feel worse having not even had the courage to come and look for this man than if he was to look for him and never find him.

Darius rose and stretched. “If we’ve had enough of a prophesy lesson, we can be on our way.”

Arica snorted at him, pleased to see Rurhic give him a dirty look as he rose and walked out of the inn to go scout ahead. She and Ryle rose as well, wincing slightly as they did. She felt better than when she first woke up, but her head still had a throbbing quality that let her know without any doubts that this day’s ride was not going to be a

pleasant one. Rubbing her temples, she followed the other two out of the inn to the stables.

V – CAEMLYN

With Rurhic scouting ahead for them, the small group made it to Caemlyn in two and a half days. Arica was quite pleased with the speed in which they managed the trip, even giving Darius a kiss on the cheek to thank him for keeping them going longer than they probably should have each day.

She had actually managed to get Darius to open up a little on the trip. As the two had grown to know one another, she discovered he was not as bad as she had originally thought. Ryle had been correct in his reasons why Darius did not trust her. It took some work on her part to get him to look past the fact that she was a Domani woman, but once he did look past it, she felt the effort was worth it.

He had balked at discussing the reasons he left Saldea, stating only that he didn't wish to dredge up old memories and reopen old wounds yet. She assumed he had been hurt pretty badly by someone, especially when she recalled Ryle telling her Darius had left because of woman troubles. She assured Darius that she would be willing to listen whenever he was ready to talk about it.

Her own reasons for leaving Arad Doman were kept secret as well. She promised to tell him later, once they were a bit more settled and could have longer to talk at one

stretch, and he had accepted gracefully. She could tell he was still quite curious, but he was willing to wait, so she was grateful for that.

When they had ridden to within sight of the city walls of the capital city of Andor, Arica had nearly fallen from her mount in awe. She had considered Whitebridge and Four Kings large, and thought Bandar Eban was massive, but nothing she had ever seen before had prepared her for the immensity of Caemlyn. Through a large collection of homes, shops, taverns, and inns that could rightly be considered a decently sized village in and of themselves lay the towering constructs that were the protective walls of the city. The walls were uniform gray stone rising fifty feet into the air to surround the city and the rolling hills it was constructed on. Arica couldn't help but think that if the walls looked this grand, the interior of the city must be beyond comprehension.

As the group rode through the area Arica heard mentioned as Low Caemlyn, she couldn't help but notice that Darius and Ryle were awed into silence, despite their attempts to appear worldly. It was nice to know that she was not the only one who was impressed by the grandeur that was Caemlyn.

Rurhic rejoined them as they traveled through towards the gate into the city proper. Arica smiled at the strange looks he received as he strode down the street to catch up with them. These people obviously viewed him in one of two ways – either they were old enough to remember the Aiel War and knew him for what he was, or they had never

seen anyone like him before. It was mildly amusing that there was little to no difference in the two looks.

The guard at the Whitebridge gate as it was marked looked at them impassively as they crossed under the massive wall and into Caemlyn's New City district. Darius had given her a brief explanation of how the city was laid out from what he had learned in Saldea and on his way here. The city was split into two areas – the New City that was just inside the main walls and the Inner City beyond another set of walls where the palace was located. After reviewing their collective funds, they had agreed that staying in the New City area would be their best option.

Darius stopped in front of a large building with a sign in front of it that depicted a large red bull. Aptly enough, the sign also identified the establishment as The Red Bull. It was not the greatest inn in the city by far, but looked comfortable enough from the outside and appeared within their budget as well. The group dismounted and handed their horses over to the young lads who had appeared from the stables next door. Darius handed each of the boys a silver penny before they walked inside.

The interior of the inn was much the same as every other inn Arica had seen since coming to this city. The common room was large with a fireplace in the back of the room. There was a small stage next to the hearth where a man sat playing a flute softly. The only real difference she could see was in the walls of the room. Instead of the bare wood

or stone that most of the other inns had favored, the walls of this common room were covered in dark paneling, giving the place a more sophisticated air.

She walked over to Darius as he finished making arrangements with the innkeeper. He smiled at her as he paid the man, then took a deep breath.

“Well,” he said. “You made it. You’re finally in Caemlyn. Now what?”

Arica shrugged before answering.

“I guess I’ll find a job then find a place to live,” she replied. “After I look around for a bit.”

Darius threw his hands up in mock defense.

“I’ve been riding for too long. I’m going to sit here and relax for a while. You’re welcome to go if you want, though. I’ll even be nice and put your pack in your room for you.”

Ryle chose that moment to walk up with Rurhic.

“I’ll go,” he interjected. “Riding is boring and wandering through the city might do me some good.”

Arica nodded and looked to the Aiel.

“How about you?”

Rurhic shook his head slowly.

“I make these Wetlanders nervous,” he replied. “I will remain here with Darius for a while and do my exploring at night.”

With another nod of acceptance, Arica removed her pack and handed it to Darius. He took it with a smile, and she turned to face Ryle.

“Shall we?” she asked.

The man smiled and took her arm, leading her out the door to the city beyond.

Arica had to admit that Caemlyn might be a bit too much for her. There were inns and shops scattered all through the New City district, and more homes than she could count. With this many people here, she realized that finding a job as a seamstress – the only marketable skill she felt she possessed that she was willing to seek employment with – would be a difficult if not impossible task.

Ryle was cheerful enough company, at least. He filled the time during their walking with jokes and witticisms, often at the expense of the patrons of many of the establishments. Remarkably, none of them heard or seemed to mind his usually crude comments about them. Perhaps it was what they expected out of a Domani, or it could be that he actually managed to be drowned out in the crowd.

The two arrived at a set of gates mounted in pure white stone walls. Arica assumed this was one of the entrances to the Inner City where the palace resided. After a brief discussion with Ryle on the subject, they decided to see what it was like in the rich part of town.

The Inner City was not as different as she would have imagined from the New City. It still held many of the same types of shops, the only real difference between them being the fact that the inns looked to be of a better quality than the ones she had seen previously.

After exploring for an hour or so, the two found themselves standing on a hill looking down into another set of walls. It was obvious that they had discovered the walls of the palace, apparently set into a hill overlooking a well-kept garden.

Glancing around to see if anyone was looking, Arica leaned towards Ryle and whispered insidiously.

“This doesn’t look very well guarded for a palace, does it?”

“Not really, no,” Ryle responded in a similar tone.

“Would you like to go for a walk in the Queen’s garden?”

Ryle stared at her in shock.

“How would we get back out?”

“Leave that to me.”

With a shrug, Ryle sat on the edge of the wall with his feet hanging over the lush green grass that filled the garden. Arica wondered for a moment how they managed to grow grass that green in this kind of weather, but put the thought out of her mind as Ryle dropped down to the other side.

Arica thought she had an idea how to make air solid using the One Power, so she embraced the Source and wove together a set of stairs for herself. Walking down gracefully to the stunned look on Ryle’s face, she smiled and flashed him a wink.

“Told you I could get us back out again,” she said with a laugh.

Ryle shook his head and returned the laugh with one of his own. Offering her his arm again, they set off down one of the garden paths. They had just made it ten paces from the wall when a loud voice startled them out of their gaiety.

“You there! What are you two doing in here?”

Arica stiffened at the sound and turned to find herself staring at a man dressed in the scarlet armor of the Queen’s Guard. The man’s sword wasn’t drawn yet, but she could clearly see an inch of steel between the hilt in his hand and the sheath at his side.

“We just wanted to go for a walk in the Queen’s gardens,” Ryle answered smoothly as he slowly began to turn Arica back towards the wall. “We didn’t mean any harm.”

The guard stepped forward and motioned behind him with his hand. As if by magic, four other guards appeared, the knots at their shoulders clearly designating them a lower rank than the man who had stopped them. The leader looked Arica and Ryle up and down before snorting and pulling another inch of steel from his sheath.

“What are your names and where did you come from?”

Ryle pinched Arica's arm gently and made a faint gesture towards the wall with his head, making it appear that he was merely cocking his head to answer the man.

"I am Rothar al'Tan, and this is my sister, Elayna. We are from a small village near Baerlon, not far from the border to Arad Doman."

Arica struggled to embrace the Source so she could recreate the steps of air she had woven earlier, but the harder she tried, the more she felt it slip from her grasp. At a surreptitiously questioning look from Ryle, she shook her head slightly and gave up. It was hard to miss the beads of sweat that suddenly broke out on her companion's face despite the chill in the air. She just hoped the guard missed it.

"Is that a fact?" the man asked in a tone that left no doubt in her mind he had seen it. "I think it would be best if the two of you came with us. Perhaps a bit of a stay in a cell will loosen your tongues so you'll tell the truth."

As the other guards approached, Arica sighed. She wanted to come to Caemlyn and she even wanted to stay for a while. She just didn't want to do it this way.

"Would you sit down?" Ryle asked irritably. "You're making me more nervous than I already am."

Arica glared at him in response, but complied and sat heavily on the small cot along one edge of the holding cell where they had been placed. The cell was barely large enough for the two of them to fit, so she had paced nearly the entire time they were there.

She wasn't sure how long they had been here, but every moment was beginning to feel like an eternity. The guards had locked them up and told them that someone would be along soon to question them, but they had seen no one as of yet. If someone did not show up soon, she was positive she would go mad.

The sound of a door being unlocked and opened in the narrow corridor outside their cell caused her to leap to her feet once more. Ryle stood as well, leaning closer to her so no one could hear him.

“Just follow my lead,” he whispered. “I have an idea.”

She regarded him suspiciously, but nodded her agreement anyway.

A man wearing a sharply pressed uniform strode to the cell door and examined them carefully. He was broad-shouldered, with dark brown hair just beginning to show signs of gray at the temples. His eyes were a deep hazel, staring at the two prisoners with an intensity that Arica felt would be quite alluring under other circumstances. He wore no knots of rank on his shoulders, but his posture and expression gave little doubt that this man was in charge at the moment.

“I am Lieutenant Talvonar,” the man said in sharp military tones. “I would like to ask you a few questions, if you don’t mind. Answer me honestly and I will let you go free so long as you pose no real threat to Queen Morgase. Lie to me and you will find I have more patience than you when it comes to having you locked up.”

Ryle assumed an air of meekness and looked back at Talvonar eagerly.

“We’ll be happy to answer your questions, sir,” he said, his voice quavering slightly. “It’s safer in here than it is outside right now anyway.”

Arica mentally rolled her eyes, but assumed the same meek-faced look that Ryle had affected.

“Safer in here, you say,” Talvonar said thoughtfully. “Perhaps you should start at the beginning.”

“My name is Rothar al’Tan,” Ryle explained after taking a deep breath, “and the young lady is my younger sister Elayna. We come from a small village just west of Baerlon, almost on the border of Arad Doman. My sister and I had decided to venture out and see a bit of Andor to the east, you see, and since our parents were killed when the Taraboners came through our village on their way to the Almouth Plain, we figured we might as well just pack up and go.”

“Continue,” the Lieutenant said bemusedly. Ryle apparently missed the tone of the man’s voice because he charged ahead with the story.

“We had just arrived in Whitebridge, and were leaving the city when this old man stopped us to ask if we had any spare coins we could offer him so he could get a meal. While I was digging in my coin purse, the man used some kind of mystical power on us, knocking us out. When we woke up, we were tied up inside some shack while he did all these strange experiments on us.”

Arica moaned theatrically and began to cry. The tears were not fake however; she knew Talvonar was not buying this story and she was terrified of what was about to happen.

“Elayna got the worst of it,” Ryle continued. “All I remember is her screams and that unnatural fire...!”

“Enough,” the Lieutenant cut him off with a laugh. “I don’t think I can handle much more of that. You are one terrible liar ‘Master al’Tan’. That is the biggest load of horse droppings I have ever heard.”

Ryle’s face fell as the realization came to him that the man was not going to let them out on the story he was giving him.

“I didn’t think it was that bad,” he muttered.

“Take my word for it,” the older man replied blandly. “Either of you care to offer me the truth this time?”

“We jumped the wall to take a walk in the Queen’s garden,” Arica blurted out suddenly. “It was just a way to try and have some adventurous fun. We don’t mean any harm to Queen Morgase, Light protect her. It was all a prank.”

Talvonar nodded once.

“That’s more like it,” he said simply. “I thought it might be something like that. It happens from time to time.”

“So can we go now?” Arica asked.

“Not yet,” the man replied. “Someone else wants to talk to you first. If they say it’s okay, I’ll turn you loose as long as you agree to stay out of the palace grounds.”

“We agree,” Arica said quickly, cutting Ryle off before he could reply himself.

“Good.”

Lieutenant Talvonar strode back down the corridor, motioning the guards to follow. Once he departed a well-dressed young woman took his place at the door to the cell.

Upon closer examination, Arica realized the woman wasn't exactly young, though her face did not give it away. Truth be told, her face had an ageless quality that she recognized immediately, even though she wasn't sure why.

"*Aes Sedai!*" Arica exclaimed, startled. She heard Ryle take in a sharp breath as he realized what their new visitor was as well.

"Very good, my dear," the *Aes Sedai* stated in a smooth even voice. "I am Alene Sedai, to be precise. I have but a few questions for you, and then I shall insure your release, so long as you answer me honestly."

Arica struggled to find her voice. She was standing here in front of an *Aes Sedai* after she and Ryle had been caught apparently trying to sneak into the palace. Whatever was to come of this could not be too pleasant. After discovering her vocal cord refusing to function, she nodded her agreement. It wasn't as if she had much choice after all.

"Good," Alene replied. "We can get this out of the way then. I felt someone channel just before the two of you were captured. Which of you was it?"

Arica felt her blood turn to ice water. If she said it was Ryle, well, she knew full well what would happen to him then. She had heard the stories that men who could channel eventually went mad so death was the only way to deal with them. But if she told the truth, this woman was likely to bundle her up and ship her off to the White Tower to be dealt with. She didn't know what happened to women who could channel but weren't *Aes Sedai*, but she didn't really want to find out yet, either.

With a sigh, Arica made her choice. Whatever happened to her would at least be less severe than what would happen to Ryle. Someone else dead that she had befriended was the last thing she needed or wanted.

"It was me," she said simply, her head held high belying the butterflies that had taken residence in her stomach.

The other woman nodded briefly. "Prove it."

Arica stared at her blankly.

"It is a simple request," Alene said with a sigh. "Prove to me that you can channel. Here, watch me."

Arica watched as the other woman embraced *saidar*. A soft glow surrounded her as she crafted her weave – a small flame dancing above her palm. If she looked closely, Arica could almost see the ways those separate threads connected together....

Alene released the weave, but the glow never faded. She was still holding *saidar*.

“Now,” she said. “Repeat what I did.”

Even though she hadn’t quite gotten all of that, Arica tried to duplicate it anyway. She embraced the source and channeled flows of fire together. Nothing happened. She tried again to duplicate what she had seen, but it felt as if something important was missing – literally the spark to fan the flame.

“I can’t,” she finally told the woman as her head dropped and she released her hold on *saidar*. She held back the despair she usually felt whenever she released her hold on that mystical energy. It was such a sense of loss that it was usually almost overwhelming, but under the current circumstances, she barely noticed it.

“That’s quite all right,” the *Aes Sedai* told her sympathetically. “I learned what I needed to by that little attempt. You can control the One Power at will, and without a block at that. Where did you learn that?”

Arica shrugged.

“I don’t know, actually,” she replied. “It seems like I just woke up one day and knew how to do stuff like that. I thought I could do what you did, but I missed something when watching you. Something with Fire, I think.”

The other woman nodded in agreement.

“Fire is one of the most difficult aspects of the Power for women to control, Earth being the other,” she replied. “We are strongest with Air and Water, while men can control with ease those two that we have trouble with. But I saw the glow around you as you tried.”

Alene cocked her head to the side and regarded Arica closely.

“I already knew it was you, of course,” she continued, ignoring the look of shock on the faces of the two prisoners. “A woman cannot detect it when a man channels nor can a man detect a woman embracing the source. It is the nature of the divide between *saidar* and *saidin*.”

Ryle snorted softly at that, but Arica continued staring at the other woman with an air of distrust. Now would be when the woman told her what her fate would be.

“As promised, I will arrange your releases,” Alene told them. “On one condition. You will deliver a letter for me to a woman in Ebou Dar. It is urgent she receive it quickly. If you agree to do this, I will have you freed and will also pay you for the journey. If you refuse, you will remain here until the guards decide what to do with you.”

“But you said all we had to do was answer your questions!” Arica exclaimed. “You never said anything about delivering a letter! You lied to us!”

“No, child,” the woman relied coolly. “I did not lie to you. I told you that so long as you were honest answering my questions, I would insure your release. I have done so. You will be released as long as you do this errand for me. I never said there would be no further stipulations on that release.”

Arica growled as she remembered the old saying about *Aes Sedai*. While it was true they never lied outright, the truth they told you was not always the truth you thought it was. She was caught and she knew it. There was really no choice in the matter.

“Fine,” Arica grumbled. “We’ll deliver your flaming letter.”

Alene smiled slightly.

“I shall bring it to you just before dusk, at which time you shall also be freed,” the woman said with a hint of mirth in her voice. “Perhaps the extra moments you spend here

will help you remember how to properly address an *Aes Sedai*. A simple ‘yes’ would have sufficed rather than profanity.”

The younger woman’s teeth ground together audibly, but she held her tongue. She was not going to be easy to explain to Darius. She could just hear his voice now, berating her for being so bloody foolish. At least Ryle was partly to blame for this mess as well. Maybe if Darius had to split his anger between them the work she did to break down his walls would not be undone.

VI – BROKEN MYTHS

The sun had begun to sink below the horizon by the time the group made camp for the night. They were four days out of Caemlyn, well on their way to Ebou Dar to the far southwest. Darius had planned a route that would take them far from the borders of Amadacia, the homeland of the Children of the Light.

Most normal people called the Children “Whitecloaks” because of the pure white robes and armor they wore. The Children of the Light did not approve. They were religious fanatics of the highest order, devoted to seeking out servants of the Dark One in whatever walk of life they might be found. The fact that many of the people they labeled a Darkfriend were nothing more than people who disagreed with the extreme measures they used was conveniently ignored, at least by members of the Order.

The one organization the Whitecloaks despised more than any other was the *Aes Sedai*. Due in large part to the stories that were told of the Age of Legends and the Time of Madness, they believed that anyone with the ability to use the One Power had to be a servant of the Dark One himself. It was a massive thorn in their side that a siege on the White Tower or Tar Valon itself would be an exercise in futility. While they might have the numbers to accomplish such a feat, a thing that had not been done in all of recorded history since the construction of the Tower, their fear of what the Tar Valon witches might do in retaliation kept them at bay.

Arica had found no way to explain the situation to Darius without revealing her ability to channel. Instead of the anger and derision she expected from him, to her surprise he was rather understanding about it. He had merely nodded at their new task, accepting it as a mission for the *Aes Sedai*. Since she was a channeler, he had seemed to consider her on similar footing to them, though without the degree of respect they commanded. That was his main reason for avoiding Amadacia. Arica tried to explain that she was not an *Aes Sedai* and did not want to be treated as one, but did not argue about the route they were taking once she understood what would happen to her if the Whitecloaks learned about her.

She had heard stories about the Children of the Light as well, specifically the faction of their Order called the Questioners. It was said that a man put to the question would admit to anything, even being in league with the Dark One, even if they followed the path of Light closer than anyone. The Questioners spared no avenue to get their

answers, and they would not stop until they got the answers they wanted to hear. That was not something Arica desired at all.

After finishing a filling meal consisting of the rabbits Darius and Rurhic had caught earlier, Arica found herself leaning against a tree, staring at the sealed letter she was to deliver for Alene Sedai. Even though the letter was sealed with wax, she had considered opening it until she thought to look at it while embracing the source. The weaves were small and of a pattern she did not recognize, but they were clearly there. It was obvious Alene did not want anyone but the letter's intended recipient to open it. Arica was not sure what would happen if she did try and open it, but she assumed she would end up having to explain why she did it to the person she was supposed to give it to.

Even the name on the letter gave her no indications as to its contents. It was addressed simply to "Cadsuane". No last name, but then Alene told her she wouldn't need one – any *Aes Sedai* she spoke to in Ebou Dar would know who Cadsuane was.

With a deep sigh she tucked the letter back into her pack. No since worrying about it. She would deliver the letter and check out this Ebou Dar. Maybe she could settle there instead of Caemlyn. She would have to wait and see.

She rested her head back against the tree and closed her eyes. So much was changing so fast, she could barely keep up with it anymore. It seemed like yesterday she

and Moria were stealing Mistress Luene's clothes and running through the streets like maniacs. Now she was suddenly trying to get over a dead fiancé, running to Caemlyn, and tied up in *Aes Sedai* schemes. And those thoughts she was finding herself having about Darius – how was she to deal with those? Her last thought before drifting off to sleep was to wonder what else could possibly happen to her.

The scream was like nothing she had ever heard before, ripping into her head and jolting her from her sleep. Her eyes snapped open, revealing a sight that made her wonder sleepily if she were still dreaming. There were four creatures standing in the middle of the camp wielding black, scythe-like swords and howling that unnatural noise that had awakened her. The creatures were at once terrifying and humorous, looking as if they had been constructed from cast off bits of other creatures. The one closest to her had a massive bear-like muzzle and hooves like a goat's for feet. It turned towards her and snarled before crossing the camp, heading her direction.

Arica lurched to her feet, wincing slightly as splinters from the tree tore into her back. She had embraced *saidar* by the time she was fully standing, so she drew together flows to create the weave she knew as “rend” and threw it at the monstrosity. The creature dropped to the ground, its head canted at an unnatural angle and its spine twisted.

She could see Darius locked sword to sword with one of the other beasts, his face a mask of intensity and concentration. Rurhic moved in a fluid motion, gracefully countering blows with his spears. She could finally understand why he called fighting “Dancing the Spears” since it looked more like he was dancing with the creature than fighting it. Ryle stood staring at the tableau around him as one of the creatures inched closer to him.

She was readying another weave when she saw him throw his hands up in front of him. A brilliant ball of flame leapt from his palms, incinerating the monster that faced him in an instant. Her jaw dropped in stunned fear. Ryle had just channeled.

The world disappeared for a moment as Arica sat down hard where she was standing. Ryle was a man who could channel; a man destined to go mad before he died. Male channelers were responsible for the breaking of the world. *Aes Sedai* sought them out and took them prisoner. And one of her friends was one of them.

As quickly as the creatures had entered the camp, the battle was over. Darius stood over the fallen corpse of the beast he had been fighting, staring at Ryle with a look of confusion, anger and fear mixed. Rurhic glanced over at Ryle and merely shrugged, finding more interest in the bodies of the monsters. Ryle looked at the three of them in turn and sighed.

“Well,” he said smiling, though no humor rang from his voice. “I guess that isn’t a secret anymore.”

“You... you can...,” Arica began, trying to form the words in her mouth and finding the task harder than it should be.

“Is this why you left Arad Doman?” Darius asked calmly.

Ryle nodded. “My father found out and sent word to the White Tower. I managed to intercept the message, but staying around wasn’t really even a consideration anymore after that.”

Arica managed to pull herself together and rose.

“Master Corl’s wagon... was that you?” she managed.

Ryle nodded again. “I thought I had a better grip on it than I thought. It was an accident. I’m sorry, for whatever that’s worth.”

“Any signs of the madness setting in yet?” Darius asked.

“No,” the other man replied. “Not yet, anyway. But I guess it’s what I’m destined for.”

Darius considered this for a moment before his face reflected his coming to some decision.

“This changes nothing, then,” he said evenly. “But at the first sign of madness, I will put you down myself rather than let you destroy us.”

“If I notice the madness coming in,” Ryle replied dryly. “I will ask you to.”

“We have a more pressing concern at the moment,” Rurhic interrupted. “Why are there Trollocs this far from the Blight?”

Arica and Ryle exchanged confused glances. Trollocs were a myth... weren't they?

“What did you call these things?” Arica asked.

Darius looked at her. “Trollocs. Spawn of the Dark One himself.”

She shook her head vigorously. “Impossible. Trollocs aren't real, they're just fantasy stories mothers tell to frighten their children when they do something bad.”

Rurhic laughed out loud as Darius snorted.

“Does that look like a fantasy to you?” Darius asked pointing to one of the fallen creatures.

“No,” she replied. “It looks like some kind of terribly deformed men. Maybe they were....”

Instead of finishing the statement, she looked over at Ryle sympathetically.

“Believe what you want,” Darius told her. “But these are Trollocs. I have fought enough in the Blight and in the Borderlands to know one when I see it. Rurhic, I think we both need to keep watch the rest of the night, just in case there’s more of them out there.”

“I hope there are not,” Rurhic answered. “If there are, there is probably a Halfman with them.”

“Wait a moment. Did you say a Halfman?” Arica asked incredulously.

“Yes,” Darius answered. “Halfman, Fade, Mydrrial, call it whatever you want. If there are more of these Trollocs out there, they are probably being led by one.”

“But those aren’t real....”

“Neither are Trollocs, according to you.”

Arica had no response to that. She glanced over at Ryle in time to see him shudder before going back to his bedroll and lying back down. Darius and Rurhic moved off to the edges of the camp, leaving her alone with her thoughts.

Trollocs and Myrdrral. Real. She had to wonder if things would get any stranger before they started making sense.

After three more days of travel, Arica had managed to put the Trollocs out of her mind only to discover something new to consider: Darius.

She found herself trying to find time to sit and talk with him every night after they ate. His presence was beginning to have a soothing effect on her, a fact that she was not quite sure how to take. If she did not know any better, she would almost swear she was falling for him. If the wistful glances she caught him giving her were any indication, it appeared that he was beginning to think of her in a manner other than a traveling companion as well.

He was not unattractive; in fact he was the exact opposite of that. He had the broad shoulders that seemed common among Borderlander men, but for some reason it

was noticeable on him where she had never paid any attention before. His eyes were like pools she could lose herself in so easily, and his hands were firm and strong.

But could she dare to feel anything for him? Everyone she had ever loved or cared about had died. Uncle Fairne was all that was left, and she had no way of knowing whether or not he had even made it back to Junigan Village after she left that night so long ago.

She studied Darius over the fire as he laid out his bedroll for the night. She knew she felt something for him and was pretty sure he felt the same. But she wasn't sure she could give him what he would expect of her in that instance. With a mental sigh, she realized how unfair that would be to him. She had to try and control whatever it was she was feeling and not encourage it in him as well. Of course, she couldn't just ignore him, either.

Arica laid out her bedroll and crawled into it, resting her head on her pack and staring up at the stars. This was looking to be a very long trip indeed.

VII – EBOU DAR

Arica slammed the letter onto the table in the common room of the small inn they had secured rooms in after they arrived in Ebou Dar. Her search for the woman she was supposed to deliver the letter to had thus far proved futile. No one in the city seemed to

have any idea who she was, nor did they have any suggestions where she could look to find someone who did know.

She dropped into the seat across from Ryle with a huff and crossed her arms beneath her breasts. The man looked up at her and offered a half-hearted grin.

“Things went well?” he asked, the sarcasm in his voice clearly evident.

Arica responded with a glare before grabbing his mug of ale and downing it in one long swallow. She slammed the mug down and emitted a loud belch that drew stares from six tables away.

“I am beginning to think this woman doesn’t even flaming exist,” she muttered, ignoring the stares. “No one here seems to have ever heard of her.”

“Do you think that *Aes Sedai* back in Caemlyn lied to us?” Ryle asked in return.

She considered this for a moment before shaking her head slowly.

“No, they can’t lie. Maybe she didn’t know this woman either hadn’t arrived yet or had already completed her business here and left.”

Ryle nodded without saying anything else, allowing Arica a moment to brood. He motioned the serving girl to bring two more mugs of the ale as his companion finally looked up and noticed there were members of her little group that were missing.

“Where are Darius and Rurhic?” she asked, her eyes searching the rest of the common room. “They were here when I left earlier.”

“They decided to go wander the city for a bit,” Ryle replied as he smiled at the serving girl. “Darius said he was tired of sitting around doing nothing, and you know how Rurhic hates being inside.”

“What about you? Didn’t you want to go find something to do?”

“Oh. I’ve kept myself occupied,” he responded with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

Arica finally noticed the serving girl who was casting seductive looks at the male Domani. She barked a laugh as she noticed the looks were being returned in kind.

“So I see,” she said through her chuckles. “Sorry if I’m interrupting your game.”

“That’s alright,” Ryle said, his eyes never leaving the young maiden serving drinks. “She seems to be a bit jealous that you’re here with me. I can use that.”

Arica laughed again as she leaned back in her seat and unbuttoned the top two fasteners on her shirt. She rubbed her hand sensuously across her exposed chest for a moment before leaning in towards Ryle again.

“Did that help?” she cooed.

Ryle could barely keep a straight face as he answered.

“I think you should sleep with a sword at your side tonight from the look you’re getting from her.”

She laughed and ran a hand gently across Ryle’s cheek. Even though he was facing her, his eyes remained fixed on the other girl across the room. Finally, he broke down in peals of his own laughter and clutched his hands to his sides.

“What happened?” Arica asked, a smile covering her face as well.

“She might as well have been running when she went back into the kitchen,” he replied as he wiped the tears from his face. “I definitely think that sword is a good idea.”

Her smile widened as she leaned back and refastened her shirt.

“Do you think you can work with that?” she asked innocently.

“Oh yes, this will be a fun day for sure.”

They both looked up as a pair of shadows crossed the table. Darius had a confused look on his face, but Rurhic was smiling as well, low chuckles emanating from his throat.

“Did I miss something?” Darius asked. “I thought you were flirting with that girl you just made so angry.”

“All part of the game,” Ryle answered mysteriously. “All part of the game.”

Darius shrugged and took a seat next to Arica as Rurhic crouched beside the table. Arica wasn't quite sure exactly why the Aiel seemed to dislike chairs so, but at least she was getting used to it.

“Any luck today?” Darius asked her, drawing her attention back to him for the moment.

She shook her head.

“Same as the past two days,” she replied. “Nothing.”

A sympathetic look crossed the man's face for a moment before he smiled and pulled a small package from his cloak.

"Maybe this will cheer you up," he said simply.

Arica took the package slowly, her face filled with suspicion.

"What's this?"

"I got you a gift," he said. "It won't bite you. Go ahead and open it."

She looked at him quizzically, an unspoken question on her lips.

"I was hoping it would be a congratulatory present," he said, answering her question as if he had read her mind. She wasn't entirely sure she liked that. "I guess it will have to be a consolation gift instead."

The thought crossed her mind that she really shouldn't be accepting gifts from him since she was trying to curtail his apparent feelings towards her, but to refuse it under the circumstances would be rude. She thanked him gracefully before untying the length of cord the fine cloth was secured with. Unwrapping the cloth revealed a small knife with a bejeweled hilt in a sheath on a thin cord. It did not appear to be very practical due to its size, but it was a beautiful gift nonetheless.

“You bought me a knife?” she asked curiously.

“The vendor said it was ceremonial,” he answered. “You’re supposed to wear it around your neck. He said the jewel in the hilt was perfect as well.”

His answer made her remember seeing several of the Ebou Dari women wearing these knives. It must be some sort of custom here, maybe something to indicate that the women here were as strong as the men.

She hesitated for a moment before slipping the cord around her neck and allowing the dagger to dangle between her breasts.

“It’s beautiful,” she told him. “Thank you.”

“I’m glad you like it,” Darius told her as he rose from his seat. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to have a hot bath and change clothes.”

“That was sweet of him,” Ryle snickered after he was out of earshot.

Arica shot him a dirty look and motioned for the serving girl to bring them more drinks. Rurhic shook his head and smiled, rocking back and forth on his haunches.

The serving girl barely glanced at Arica as she brought the drinks to the table, but the ceremonial knife caught her attention. She glared at it before slapping Ryle full across the cheek and dumping his drink in his lap.

“You’re *married*?” the girl cried, staring at Ryle in anger.

Ryle looked shocked.

“What are you talking about?” he exclaimed. “What in the Light was that for?”

The girl pointed at the knife around Arica’s neck.

“You flirt with me until your wife arrives and shows you that marriage knife and expect me not to be furious with you? What kind of man are you? That’s terrible, even for a Domani!”

“Wait,” Arica said, confusion filling her face. “Did you say ‘marriage knife’?”

“I’m so sorry,” the girl told her. “I never would have acted the way I did had I known the two of you were married. I’m also sorry you had to find this out about your husband.”

Arica was struggling to understand what was going on.

“Look,” she told the girl. “I’m not from here. What are you talking about?”

The serving girl blushed slightly and pointed to the knife again.

“That is an Ebou Dari ceremonial marriage knife. A man gives it to his wife after they are wed. The jewel in the hilt indicates whether he is alive or dead, and how he died if he is dead. Other jewels in the hilt would indicate children, whether they were boys or girls, alive or dead, and how they died as well. Had I realized you were married to him before, I would never have returned his attentions....”

“He and I are *not* married,” Arica cut her off, flames rising in her cheeks. “You two can do whatever you like as far as I’m concerned. But I think I *do* need to have a talk with my *husband*.”

Arica rose from the table and stormed off towards the stairs, leaving behind a flustered Ryle, a highly amused Rurhic, and a very confused and embarrassed serving girl.

The door to Darius’s room crashed open with such force it left a dent in the wall it was mounted into. The man spun around with his clothes in his hand, his sword belt

laying on the bed a good two paces from where he stood in his underclothes, the damp towel in his hand his only weapon.

Arica stood in the doorway, hands on her hips and a look of utter fury on her face. She looked Darius up and down, inwardly tingling with excitement at seeing him in such a state of undress. But this wasn't the time for those feelings. She was mad and was here to give him a piece of her mind, not to make eyes at him.

"Arica," he was saying. "What is it? What happened?"

She took a deep breath before answering.

"What under the bloody Light did you think you were doing?" she cried as she entered the room fully and slammed the door closed with nearly as much force as she had opened it.

The expression on Darius's face changed from concern to confusion in an instant.

"What are you talking about?" he pleaded.

Instead of answering verbally, Arica pulled the knife from against her chest and shook it at him.

The confusion on the man's face deepened with a touch of anger starting to bloom in his cheeks with it.

"I thought you said you liked the gift!" he exclaimed.

"I did until I realized you thought I was your wife!"

Darius sat down on the floor with a thud, the confusion overwhelming any other expression he might have tried to convey.

"What-?" he began slowly.

"This is a ceremonial marriage knife," Arica explained angrily. "Men give it to their wives as a show of their love. I knew you were staring to feel something for me, but this is a poor way to express it!"

Still sitting on the floor, Darius shook his head slowly.

"I don't... I mean I didn't... I wouldn't..." he stammered.

"Save it," she replied harshly. "Next time talk to me before proposing to me or assuming something about me."

She spun on her heel and exited the room with the same violence she had entered it. She stomped towards the stairs, hoping desperately that the innkeeper had some good brandy on hand.

Arica tried once more to stand and failed miserably. It was now full dark outside and she had been drinking since her argument with Darius shortly after time for the midday meal. She had convinced the innkeeper to bring her brandy, and was now nearly finished with her third bottle.

Footsteps behind her broke through her drunken haze just enough to register in her mind. She turned her head, wincing as the room lurched with the faint motion. She glanced up at Ryle looking down at her with a cross between amusement and concern on his face.

“Come on,” he told her. “The innkeeper said he thought you needed some sleep. Since I’m your ‘brother’ and your ‘husband’ has stayed in his room all night, he asked me to help you to bed.”

She mumbled something even she didn’t understand and allowed him to pull her to her feet. It took only a moment to discover that her legs were no longer made of flesh and bone, but some soft flexible cord. They crumpled beneath her, pulling Ryle to the floor with her.

He swore silently and picked her up in his arms, cradling her. He had managed to get her into her room and onto her bed when what he first told her penetrated through the fog in her mind.

“Way a minn,” she slurred. “Husband?”

With a speed that startled Ryle she was on her feet with a dagger in her hand. He took a step back as she brandished the weapon at him in a threatening manner.

“Hey!” he cried in alarm. “Calm down! I’m just trying to help you to bed!”

Her eyes flashed in fury as she swung the dagger at him. Her drunken state was the only thing that saved him from a nasty cut. She overbalanced and spun across the room before catching herself on the small table and turning towards him again.

“You’re not doing anything with me and that bed!” she screamed as she charged again.

She stopped suddenly and found herself being lifted into the air. Ryle was still standing across the room from her, a look of concentration on his face. Realizing that he was using the One Power on her, she lost all control and began screaming and flailing wildly.

“Put me down you Light-blinded flaming monster! What do you bloody think you’re bloody doing? Let go of me!”

Ryle winced, but continued to hold her.

Even when she awoke the next morning, her head feeling like it had been run over by a merchant’s cart, she could not remember how long she had screamed at him before losing consciousness, but from the raw feeling in her throat, it must have been a long while.

Arica came back down briefly in the morning, her stomach churning with each step she took. She found Ryle in the common room and apologized to him for trying to kill him.

“You were drunk,” he had said. “Don’t worry about it.”

She learned from him that Darius and Rurhic were out exploring some more, this time actually looking for leads on this mysterious woman she was to deliver the letter to. She was pretty sure Darius was just doing it to be rid of her sooner after the way she treated him yesterday, but at least someone was doing something productive today.

She went back upstairs and fell back asleep almost immediately. When she awoke this time, she actually felt better. She dressed and had her midday meal before heading out to run one other errand that she had decided was as important – if not more so – than the delivery of the *Aes Sedai* letter.

It was late by the time Arica got back and knocked on Darius's door. She was curious how he was going to react to the proposition she was going to make. She even considered forgetting about it herself, but after the events of the day she just didn't want to be alone.

The man answered the door and regarded her with a look that was equal parts irritation and curiosity. The glint in his eyes indicated he was prepared for another outburst from her and had no intention of taking it sitting down this time.

She held up her hands defensively.

“Truce,” she said simply. “I’m sorry for how I acted yesterday. Can I come in and talk to you?”

He nodded and stepped to the side, allowing her entrance to the room. He glanced at the pack slung over her shoulder with interest but said nothing. Once she was in the

room, she placed the pack on the floor beside the bed and sat down on it. Darius pulled the chair from the small table over to the bed and sat as well.

“Look,” she started carefully. “I know you had no idea what the knife meant when you bought it. It was a sweet gesture and I blew it all out of proportion. I tend to do that from time to time.”

“So I’ve noticed,” he replied evenly. After looking at him to make sure he was not teasing her, she continued.

“I’m sure you have. I have a very sore spot about people trying to get too close to me. The knife was simply a gift, nothing more. I think that if it was you’re enough of a man to have said so. It worked out well in the long run, anyway. I had the jewel’s setting changed to reflect my heart a bit more.”

She held it out to him so he could see the setting was now one that represented a husband who had died in battle. He looked up at her in surprise and opened his mouth to say something before she cut him off with a wave of her hand as she dropped the knife back to her chest.

“We weren’t married yet, but it was close enough for me to count. I really don’t want to get into it any more than that right now. Just getting this thing changed made me remember more than I cared to for the moment.”

He nodded his head in acceptance of her reasoning and motioned for her to continue.

“The bottom line is that I’m sorry I questioned your motives. Can you forgive me?”

Darius leaned forward and took one of her hands in both of his.

“All you had to do was ask. I can’t exactly stay mad since there was a valid reason for it, can I?”

She smiled at him and nodded.

“Let’s see if you stay so understanding after I tell you the rest of the reason I’m here.”

He leaned back in the chair, releasing her hand and regarded her with suspicion.

“What now?” he asked, a note of irritation creeping back into his voice.

“I’m sleeping in here with you tonight.”

The chair crashed to the ground as he leapt to his feet.

“What?” he exclaimed, stunned. “Why?”

“For many reasons, only three of which bear any real concern,” she replied. “One, because that innkeeper assumed I was your wife, we had a fight, and I was looking for someone else to find comfort with and I refuse to have him think of me as nothing more than a brain-dead tramp. Two, because while you didn’t know what this knife meant, you should have been more careful about it and asked the merchant who sold it to you more questions than you did. Maybe you’ll know better next time if I give you a taste of what this is supposed to mean.”

She took a deep breath and looked at him in complete seriousness.

“And three, because after all I’ve been thinking about today, I really don’t want to be alone tonight.”

Darius stared at her for a long time, his breath coming in deep, even bursts. Finally he shook his head and put the chair back the way it belonged.

“Fine,” he said tightly.

She smiled again and reached for her pack. She had her shift out and her shirt half off before he realized what she was doing.

“Couldn’t you have said something first?” he stammered as he turned his back to her quickly, a flush spreading across his cheeks.

Arica laughed and continued to change into her nightclothes.

“It’s not like you haven’t seen it before,” she commented innocently. “Remember how we met?”

“That was different,” he replied, still trying desperately to keep his eyes averted. “You were in danger then.”

“Besides,” she continued, ignoring his response. “We’re supposed to be married. You’d be used to the sight of me without my clothes on if we really were husband and wife. You can turn around now, by the way.”

He turned to face her again, his eyes flashing.

“We aren’t really married, and you aren’t going to let me live this down are you?”

She appeared to consider this for a moment.

“Not for some time to come, no,” she answered with a laugh.

As she settled into bed, Darius began to unpack his bedroll and spread it on the floor beside the bed. Arica leaned up on one arm and propped her chin in her hand.

“You don’t have to do that,” she said gently. “You are welcome to sleep in bed with me.”

Darius stiffened and regarded her with shock. She rolled her eyes.

“I said sleep, Darius. That is what beds were made for, you know. I don’t bite and I’m really not in the mood tonight.”

He stared at her for a moment longer before putting his bedroll away and tugging his shirt over his head. After removing his boots as well, he laid down on the bed carefully, keeping a significant distance between himself and the girl lying in the bed as well.

“I said I don’t bite,” she said irritably. “Are you really going to try and sleep like that?”

“I’ll be okay,” he replied quickly.

Arica sighed and rolled over with her back to him.

“Suit yourself,” she mumbled. “Just don’t blame me when you fall off the bed.”

She fell into a deep sleep almost instantly, reliving over and over the night she had lost Rytor in a nightmare of blood. She never even noticed when Darius rolled over to hold her as her tears flowed through the dreams to reality.

VIII – CADSUANE

Arica’s luck finally changed as they neared the end of their first week in Ebou Dar. She was wandering through the streets searching for someone who might know where to find this Cadsuane woman when she noticed an *Aes Sedai* entering one of the renown herbalist’s shops. There was no mistaking those ageless features, even from an angle and the short glimpse she got of the woman’s face. Eagerly, she raced to the shop and waited outside the door for the woman to reemerge.

As she waited, she chuckled as she thought about the way Darius had been acting since she moved into his room a few days ago. He was almost constantly on edge now, with Rurhic and Ryle both giving him a hard time about the mistake with the marriage knife. The more he denied anything going on between himself and Arica, the more they treated him the opposite. She did nothing to dispel the thoughts they were having of

course – that wouldn't be much fun at all. Rurhic had even offered at one point to make him a marriage wreath to present to her so it could be official. The Aiel had laughed heartily at his own suggestion as the other three had looked on in confusion. Aiel humor was something that apparently took getting used to.

Darius had fumed, but he didn't kick her out of his room. She thought he was secretly pleased that she was sharing his bed with him, even though nothing was going on there but sleeping.

Last night had proved the most interesting, since she was feeling a bit playful before bedtime. She had crawled into bed after Darius, lying on her back smiling at the ceiling before complaining about being hot. She had stripped off her shift and pulled the covers up to cover her nakedness before Darius had time to react. When he started to get out of the bed, she had told him to stop acting like such a baby and be a man about it. The comment had wounded his pride enough to keep him in the bed at least.

She laid there for several more moments, allowing her breathing to fade into the sound it made when she was asleep. She could tell by the way Darius kept fidgeting that he was still awake as well. She slowly rolled over and pressed herself against his back, struggling to hold in her laughter at his sharp intake of breath. When she draped her bare leg across his, she was sure his startled screech woke up half the inn. She managed to keep her control, though, so he didn't move for fear of waking her and possibly causing

something more to happen. He was so embarrassed he refused to even look at her this morning.

So involved in her thoughts was she that she almost missed the *Aes Sedai* leaving the small shop. She raced down the crowded street after her, finally managing to come abreast with the other woman.

“Excuse me, *Aes Sedai*,” she asked once she had regained her breath. “Can I trouble you for a moment?”

The other woman stopped and turned towards her, thinly veiled impatience showing through on her ageless face.

“Yes, child. What can I do for you?”

Arica tugged the letter from her cloak and showed it to the woman.

“I was asked by Alene Sedai in Caemlyn to deliver this letter, and I can’t find this Cadsuane Sedai woman I’m supposed to give it to,” she explained. “Alene Sedai told me that anyone I asked would know who this woman is, but so far no one seems to have a clue.”

The *Aes Sedai* took the letter from Arica and glanced at it briefly. Arica didn't miss the fact that she had embraced the source as she did so. After a moment, the woman handed the letter back to her.

"It appears you tell the truth, child," the woman said calmly. "Cadsuane is no longer in Ebou Dar. She went to her small farm four days' ride from here to the east. If you stay on the main roads, you cannot miss it."

Arica's heart sank as she realized she still had much to do before she would be free of these people. At least she knew where to look now instead of wandering the streets aimlessly. She curtsied as well as she could remember how and bowed her head respectfully.

"Thank you, *Aes Sedai*," she said. "I will leave at once."

The other woman smiled in return before continuing on her way. Arica straightened and turned towards the inn. Now to gather the others. They could be on their way by morning and then she could be finished with *Aes Sedai*.

The trip to the farm was almost nothing more than a waste of time. They had spent most of the nights camped alongside the overgrown path that passed for a road here, a good hour from the main road to Illian. If it had not been for the farmer they had

met their first day out, they might have ridden the entire distance to Illian before realizing the farm they sought was on a different road altogether. Luckily, the man knew who Cadsuane was – had even given her a cup of tea as she passed – and was able to point them in the right direction.

Arica continued to sleep in Darius's tent with him at night, frustrating him no end. The others were no help to him in that regard, teasing him when he complained about it by asking if she hadn't been in the mood the night before and blaming that for his disturbance. Even though he complained, she could not help noticing that he never once tried to kick her out or not allow her to come in. She was sure that deep down there was a part of him that was thrilled by the attention.

Her thoughts of Darius were interrupted as they rode into a small field covered in rosebushes. The flowers were beautiful, emitting a soft scent that was at once enticing and relaxing. The bushes were tended with a precision that clearly revealed the owner of the farm as the elusive Cadsuane.

They made their way through the field to a small cabin in the midst of the fragrant roses. A man stood outside the door to the cabin, a sword at his waist, his cloak making him blend in almost perfectly with the ground and the wall of the cabin. His eyes were steady on the group as they rode up, his posture that of carefully controlled relaxation. Arica felt a chill run down her spine at the way the man held himself. On rare occasions, she had met men in her home village that held themselves in such a manner. They may

have just been soldiers out enjoying themselves in the tavern, but everything about them screamed “warrior”. This man was no different. Arica had no doubts whatsoever that this was the *Aes Sedai*’s warder – her companion and protector.

As the group drew abreast of the man, he pushed away from the wall and strode towards them, his cloak flowing behind him. The continuously changing nature of the cloak was beginning to make Arica nauseous by the time she dismounted and stepped forwards to meet the man.

“Who are you?” the man asked her without preamble, his gravelly voice filled with suspicion.

“My name is Arica Treamon d’Oronarico,” she began after a deep breath. “I have a letter from....”

“Alene Sedai,” the man finished for her. “Cadsuane Sedai has been waiting for you. Follow me.”

Without waiting for a response from her, the man walked purposefully back to the door. He paused when he got there, waiting impatiently for her to catch up.

She joined him at the door, Darius, Rurhic, and Ryle following close behind. The warder held up a hand causing them to halt out of pure instinct.

“Just her,” he commanded. “The rest of you will wait out here until Cadsuane Sedai says otherwise.”

The door opened, revealing an old woman standing there.

“That includes you, Gon,” she said simply.

The warder spun to face her, an argument forming on his lips.

“This girl means me no harm, nor could she do any if she wanted to,” Cadsuane told him before he could speak. “You will wait outside with these gentlemen. This is *Aes Sedai* business.”

Darius opened his mouth to protest as well, but snapped it shut quickly at a glance from the old *Aes Sedai*. The woman nodded once, apparently satisfied that she was not being challenged further and turned back to Arica, holding out a hand invitingly.

“Come on in, my dear,” she said softly. “I made us some tea and I’d hate for it to go cold before we got to it.”

Arica took the woman’s hand and allowed herself to be gently pulled into the cabin. Cadsuane pointed to a chair beside a sparse table and closed the door securely

behind them, making sure to throw the lock before joining the girl. She poured two cups of tea and applied a liberal amount of honey to each before regarding Arica carefully.

Swallowing hard, Arica pulled the letter from her cloak and handed it over to Cadsuane.

“Alene Sedai asked me to bring this to you back in Caemlyn,” she said carefully, avoiding meeting the other woman’s eyes. “So here it is.”

“Thank you child,” Cadsuane replied, taking the letter and dropping it with unconcern to the table. “Now let’s talk about the real issues here. Put all our cards out on the table. How long have you been able to channel?”

Arica looked at the older woman in utter shock. Her mouth was moving, but no sound was coming out. How in the Light did she know that?

Cadsuane laughed.

“Before you have a seizure, rest assured that I didn’t rip the information from your mind or anything else so crude and disgusting. I received a message by pigeon from Alene Sedai several days ago. I left Ebou Dar so I could come here to talk to you properly, without any concern of being overheard. Not too many of the other *Aes Sedai*

even know I'm still alive, and for now I wish to keep it that way. So answer my question: how long have you been able to channel?"

Arica considered the woman carefully before sighing. There was no use trying to lie to this woman. She would know instantly and they would be there forever.

"About a year now," she answered. "Maybe before that, but I've known about it for almost a year."

Cadsuane nodded.

"That is close to what Alene surmised," the older woman said. "How did you overcome your block? It's quite unusual to find a wilder who has already managed to control their ability to touch the One Power."

"I really don't know," Arica told her. "It seems like I just woke up one day and knew how to do all this stuff."

The *Aes Sedai* considered this for a moment. She leaned forward and rested her elbows on the table.

“In nearly three hundred years I have never heard of a girl waking up and just knowing how to channel. Someone had to have taught you, I’m sure you would agree with that. The question then becomes why can’t you remember being taught?”

Arica said nothing, sensing that the woman was not finished yet, only gearing up to something else. Cadsuane tapped a finger against her cheek in a thoughtful manner before focusing on the girl once again.

“Would you allow me to try something?” she asked.

“Like what?” Arica asked, suspicion and memories of the stories she had been told racing through her mind.

“I want to see if the forgetfulness is intentional or done by someone else,” Cadsuane responded with a sigh. “It will not hurt and will only take a moment.”

Arica swallowed and nodded.

Cadsuane leaned over the table and studied the younger woman intently. After a few moments she leaned back and snorted.

“I believe it’s obvious that someone made you forget, but whatever they did is invisible to me. They must have inverted the weave before they tied it off. Anyone who would use compulsion in such a manner....”

The woman trailed off as Arica stared at her, her mouth hanging open. Someone had *made* her forget? Who? Why? And what did Cadsuane Sedai mean by “inverted the weave” and “tied off” and “compulsion”? She was just opening her mouth to ask when Cadsuane snapped back to where she was.

“It really doesn’t matter at this point, does it?” the old woman muttered. Then louder, “You must go to the White Tower and finish learning to be an *Aes Sedai*.”

“I bloody will not!” Arica exclaimed. “I have no desire to be an *Aes Sedai*, nor do I wish to go to the White bloody Tower.”

One moment Arica was speaking and the next she found herself lying on the floor, her cheek burning in the shape of Cadsuane’s hand.

“You will watch your tongue or I will remove it,” the woman told her warningly. “Now sit down and listen for a moment.”

Arica grudgingly picked herself up off the floor and resumed her seat. Her face still stung and her eyes were flashing daggers at the older woman.

“Good. Now I can tell you why you need to go to the White Tower,” Cadsuane continued as if nothing had happened. “Firstly, they can help you put the pieces back together from that missing period where you learned to channel. They will also make sure you know fully how to control your abilities. Secondly, they will teach you some much needed discipline. But let’s even forget about all that for a moment.”

Cadsuane refilled her teacup and took a sip before continuing.

“Have you ever heard of the Dragon Reborn?” she asked.

“Actually,” Arica responded, confusion evident on her face. “One of my companions – the Aiel – crossed the Dragonwall to find him. He told me a little about the prophecies regarding him, but I still don’t know whether to believe it or not. I always thought that was just a legend.”

“So were the *Aes Sedai*,” Cadsuane mumbled dryly. “But I can assure you it is no legend. The day is coming very soon when the Dragon Reborn will announce himself and prepare for the day he will do battle with the Dark One.”

“*Tarmon Gai’din*,” Arica whispered.

“Precisely,” the older woman said with a nod. “At that day, the *Aes Sedai* must stand with the Dragon in order to defeat the evil that will arise and come against him. In fact, the prophecies even say that the broken tower will bend knee to the forgotten sign. What that truly means is up for interpretation, but the broken tower could well be the White Tower, though I don’t understand why it’s called broken, and the forgotten sign could be the banner of the Dragon, a thing unseen since the Age of Legends.”

Cadsuane sighed and leaned back in her chair.

“The problem lies in the fact that the numbers in the White Tower have dwindled considerably from what they once were. I have even retired myself and no longer go to the Tower for anything lately. So we find ourselves in a precarious position: the Last Battle is at our doorstep and we may not have enough sisters in the Tower to support the Light when it does arrive.

“That’s why it is so urgent that you go to the Tower. Someone like you, someone young who would be an Accepted not long after arriving, and someone who has already learned a great deal about how to channel. You would be life’s blood that is so desperately needed in the time ahead.

“And most important to you, my child, you could finally stop running and learn how to live again.”

Arica stiffened.

“What do you mean by that?” she asked bitterly.

The old woman gave her a wistful smile.

“I am over three hundred years old, child. That is one of the things the One Power does for those who can use it – it extends our age for an undetermined period of time. We age slower, but we still mature. After that long on this world, I have learned to read signs in people and you are screaming out tragedy and escapism. Stop me if I’m wrong anywhere here.”

Cadsuane began to tick off points on her fingers.

“You have experienced great loss more than once from people you loved and cared deeply about; you are trying to find a place you can live without that fear on your mind constantly; you lost a part of your life, a part you can no longer remember and that terrifies you as well; you are afraid to make close friends for fear they will be gone as well. Am I close on anything I’ve said, or am I completely wrong?”

Arica stared at the woman and shivered involuntarily. It was as if she had been spread open before the woman and her entire past laid bare for her to see. She tried to answer, to tell Cadsuane that she was accurate about every last detail, but no words

would come. She could only make her mouth work silently as a tear slipped down her cheek. The old woman reached across and laid a comforting hand on her shoulder.

“*Aes Sedai* do not call each other ‘sister’ for a meaningless purpose,” she said softly. “We are family. As close knit a family as you will ever find. We have our squabbles, mind, but underneath it all, we have the same goals and desires: to see the world freed from the influence of the Dark One. That is why we take three oaths when we are raised a full *Aes Sedai*. To never speak any word that is not true; to never make a weapon for one man to kill another; and to never use the One Power as a weapon except against shadowspawn or in the last extreme defense of our lives, the life of our warder, or in defense of the life of another sister. Our very name means ‘servant of all’. That is what we are and what we do.

“Not to say some of the stories are not true. I have personally seen us make kings and queens dance and jump to our command. Whether out of fear or respect it’s hard to say. But we are not the monsters many believe us to be.”

For a long time Arica said nothing. She was beyond words now, the things she had just been told weighing heavily on her mind. Finally she looked up at Cadsuane, her cheeks stained with the tears that ran so freely from her eyes. She had made her decision, and now she had to say it to make it real. She took a deep breath and locked eyes with the older woman.

“When my friends and I leave here,” she said purposefully. “I am going to Tar Valon and present myself to the White Tower. I will become *Aes Sedai*.”

Cadsuane smiled.

“Let’s bring your friends in,” she said as she squeezed Arica’s shoulder. “I believe they will need to know of your decision. And I am also sure they would like a hot meal and a good night’s rest before you go.”

IX – TURNING POINTS

Arica stood staring out the window of their inn at the city sprawled beneath her. The sun was just beginning to creep over the horizon, signaling the beginning of a new day and revealing why the Cairheinen flag bore the rising sun as its symbol. The buildings below sparkled like molten gold in the early morning rays, shining brightly to make the day seem much lighter than the hour would normally be.

The group had stayed the night as Cadsuane’s guests before returning to the main roads and heading north through Murandy and back through Caemlyn. Arica had asked for an audience with Alene Sedai at the palace, and was mildly disappointed to learn that the woman had departed several days earlier without mentioning where she was headed. She guessed the *Aes Sedai* was either going back to the White Tower or to meet Cadsuane, but had no proof of either.

At her insistence, they had then gone east to Arringale before branching north again bringing them to Cairhein. Arica told them it was so she could see a bit more of the country before she began her training at the White Tower, but she knew deep inside that it was more a way to stall for time than anything else.

Darius mumbled something in his sleep causing her to turn from the window for a moment to regard him. He rolled over and did not awaken so she turned back to the window and was lost in thought once more.

Her friends had treated her decision with admiration; even Ryle who would be going his own way from here had complemented her on the choice. She understood his reluctance to walk into the middle of Tar Valon being able to channel, but knew she was going to miss him greatly all the same.

Rurhic had come close to swearing fealty to her on the spot, and it was only through much discussion that she had convinced him to change his mind. He swore her safety until they got to the Tower, though, and would resume his search for the Dragon Reborn afterwards.

Darius had said nothing at first, waiting until the others were asleep before pulling her to the side. He had asked her if she would consider having him as her warder, a request she was more than happy to grant. If she ever needed verification of his feelings

for her, she had gotten them then in a way. He still had not come right out and admitted any feelings towards her. His explanation for wanting to be her warder was that since everyone else would be going their own way, he felt it was his duty to stay with her and protect her. When she arrived at the Tower, he would continue on to Saldea to visit family, then come back to train with the other warders before she was raised to the shawl and given permission to bond him.

She was still trying to understand all that Cadsuane had told her about the ways the *Aes Sedai* worked. She thought the warder bond was fairly straightforward – they would have a connection with each other until one of them died; his aging would slow like hers had; and they would always be able to tell where the other was. The bond was a tool to allow the warders to better protect their mistress. Cadsuane had also tried to explain the initiation ritual to her, but finally gave up and said that the Mistress of Novices would explain it when the time was right.

Since leaving the cabin, Arica had tried her best to live up to the things she would have expected of her once she reached Tar Valon. She had done her best to follow the three oaths Cadsuane had explained, but was secretly pleased that she could still manage to lie if the occasion called for it.

It was through the attempt to tell only the truth that she began to realize just how deep her feelings for Darius were running. She had continued her little fun by sleeping in his tent or room with him, even in the same bed as him. But the closer they got to the

Tower, the more she began to realize that she needed something more than this little thrill she was having.

That was the reason that she had decided to leave them all behind.

She picked her pack up off the floor beside her chair and threw it over her shoulder. Making her way to the door carefully, she took one last look at the man sleeping in the bed on the other side of the room. This really was for the best; if she left, nothing could happen to take him from her.

The door clicked softly as she closed it behind her and made her way down the stairs and out of the inn.

Rurhic looked over the edge of the inn's roof at the sound of the front door closing. He was about to come down and go wake the others, but having someone see him drop down from the roof would not be a good way to start the day.

He watched Arica heading off in the direction of the river that ran alongside the city and frowned. There was no reason he could think of that she would be leaving out before the sun was fully up and without the rest of them. He did seem to remember the girl commenting on how she was so afraid of those she loved dying around her and hoped that she had not done something foolish due to that fear.

Leaping to the roof of the building nearest the inn, Rurhic followed the girl as she made her way through the streets. Maybe he could convince her not to be this foolish after all.

It was well after midday when Arica heard someone sit down beside her at the edge of the river. She glanced over long enough to see that it was Rurhic, then turned back to her contemplation.

She had left the city and come here after she departed from the inn, pausing only long enough to pick up some food for the day. She had remained here staring at the rushing water, trying to sort out her feelings and made the decision to leave and go to Tar Valon alone. For some reason, she was having a hard time doing that.

She had managed to sort a few things out over the hours she had been here. She realized that she was in love with Darius. She had even begun to consider this a test. Over the course of the day she had convinced herself that if he loved her as well, he would find her. When Rurhic sat beside her, her heart leapt for a moment until she noticed who it was. At least someone had come looking for her.

Rurhic sat staring at the water as well, his eyes wide and the only expression of his amazement that she could see.

“Before I came here,” he commented, the contemplation in his voice an obvious ruse, even to her. “I never thought I would ever see so much water in one place. It is so precious to us in the Waste and so rare that few could have ever believed this was here except those who came back from the war twenty years ago.”

He turned and faced Arica, his face a mask of stone.

“What are you doing out here?” he asked bluntly.

Arica continued to stare at the water, saying nothing.

“Am I to take it you do not feel like talking to a friend today?”

She finally turned to face him as well.

“Sorry, Rurhic,” she said softly. “You’re just not who I was hoping would find me.”

The Aiel nodded in understanding.

“This is a large city,” he replied. “You cannot expect him to find you so easily.”

Arica rubbed her face with her hands, the dampness of the water's edge allowing her to cover the tears that threatened to fall at any moment.

"If he cared," she said, her voice muffled by her hands. "He would find a way. He would find me."

Rurhic turned back to the water and was silent for a moment.

"You are not a fool, Arica," he finally said. "Why are you acting like one?"

Coming from anyone else, Arica would have taken the comment as an insult and been ready to fight at that very moment. But coming from the Aiel, she knew he was merely stating a fact as he saw it. To tell the truth, she had to admit that she was acting a bit foolish.

"He won't open up at all," she finally wailed, the tears breaking free at last. "I love him so deeply and he barely acknowledges my existence."

The man turned to her again.

"He cares," he said softly. "You are in the midst of the situation and cannot see it as it truly is. Anyone looking in can tell that he cares a great deal. It is also obvious that he has been hurt badly and has needed to heal. You have helped with that healing."

Perhaps it is time for the both of you to be done with your secrets from each other and trust.”

Arica covered her face again as she wept. She cried for Rytor, and the future they could never have; for Moria, and the life she would never get to experience; and she also cried for herself, and the torture she put herself through on a daily basis by refusing to get on with her own life. Cadsuane had told her that the White Tower would be a safe haven for her, but she was not prepared to confront her demons before she even arrived. Unfortunately, the Wheel willed differently and face those demons she must.

After several moments she finally brought her tears under control. She wiped her eyes on her sleeve and looked up at Rurhic, fully expecting him to be looking down on her as if she were just some little child and beneath his friendship. To her pleasant surprise, however, he was gazing at her with concern on his face and a deep seated caring that she had sorely missed. This man truly was her friend, for good or ill, and he wanted to help but did not know how.

“What do I do now?” she asked him, the helplessness in her voice a shock even to her.

“Go to him,” the man replied without hesitation. “Tell him how you feel. Be done with the subterfuge and confess your heart to him. He will not turn you away if you are honest.”

Arica nodded as the Aiel stood and offered her a hand up. She took it and looked up into his face.

“I’m scared, Rurhic,” she said.

Rurhic smiled.

“You have decided to become *Aes Sedai*. At the moment of the Last Battle, you will look back and wonder how you ever considered this to be fear at all.”

“That’s not very reassuring,” she replied dryly.

The sun was beginning its decent as Arica stepped into the common room with Rurhic at her side. She saw Ryle sitting near the fire and asked where Darius was. The other Domani gave her a wistful smile and pointed at the ceiling. She nodded her thanks and made her way to the stairs as Rurhic crouched down beside Ryle and began speaking to him softly.

When she reached the door to Darius’s room she paused and took a deep breath. This was it – the point of no turning back. Once she told him what she had to say, she

would know exactly how the man felt about her. With a final nod, she steeled herself and knocked on the broad wooden door.

Darius opened the door after a moment and stood there glaring at her, flames of anger dancing in his eyes.

“Where have you been?” he demanded.

Arica bristled immediately. She was here to pour out her heart and he wanted to quibble. It was time to take control of this conversation right now!

“I was out,” she answered. “Now could you hold the lecture until later? I have something important to say.

“So,” he said, leaning against the doorframe and crossing his arms in front of him. “Talk.”

Something snapped inside Arica’s soul. All she wanted to do was tell this man that she loved him, but all he could do was act superior. Her blood began to boil as she slapped him across the face hard enough to make her hand go numb.

“I went off to think and try to sort things out and try and figure out how to tell you that I am in love with you, you Light-blinded buffoon!” she screamed into his startled

face. “I was terrified to tell you because everyone I have ever loved ended up dying and leaving me to pick up the pieces and move on. I was thinking about leaving so I wouldn’t have to deal with that again! And now when I realize it’s time for me to grow up and face those fears, you want to act like you are so much better than I am! Blood and bloody ashes! I have no idea how you feel! I’m terrified you’re going to push me away after I tell you this and you have the audacity to start it before I even have a chance to get the words out!”

Darius opened his mouth to speak, but Arica continued on over him.

“You flaming arse! Why didn’t you come looking for me? Do you even care at all? Or am I just some damn fool girl with a bloody childhood crush?”

“Arica,” he said loud enough to make her stop and look at him. “I love you as well. I just didn’t know how to tell you. I didn’t come after you because I thought I had done something to drive you away!”

Arica was stunned to silence. He had said it. He had finally said the words she had been longing to hear him say. She opened her mouth to respond and discovered she was beyond words. With unbridled passion, she grabbed him by the collar and pulled him into a deep kiss.

The two stayed that way for a long while, their lips touching and their hearts swelling. Finally Arica pulled away and grabbed Darius's crotch hard. The man yelped and tried to pull away. The motion caused another squeal to come from his throat as the pain set in so he just stood still.

"If you ever take that aloof attitude with me again," she said dangerously. "I will cut your bollocks off and wear them as a necklace alongside this knife you gave me. And if you die on me, I'll pull every trick I learn at the White Tower to resurrect you and emasculate you then, too. Am I clear?"

"Crystal," he replied in a tight voice. His face relaxed as she released her grip. "And I promise you, Arica, I will never leave you."

The two embraced again, their lips seeking each other out like ships finding a port in a storm. Arica broke the kiss again and shoved Darius backwards into his room, causing him to trip and sprawl on his back against the bed.

"Now," she said seductively as she entered the room and slammed the door behind her. "It's time to stop pretending."

Darius swallowed hard as her blouse fell over his head and her hands crawled across his chest. There was little doubt she had been telling the truth: this was definitely not pretending any more.

The two stayed awake well into the small hours of the morning. Arica confessed her past to Darius, telling him everything from Moria's death and her revenge on Lord Draven all the way through the night Rytor fell to the Taraboner's blade. Darius was understanding throughout it all, expressing his surprise at times and holding her hand gently at others.

Darius confessed his past as well, of a love lost in the same manner as she lost Rytor, though his was a bit more tragic since she was not involved in battle when she was stricken. He explained how he had left home to rediscover himself and heal, never expecting that he would find love again along the way.

They talked about other things as well – their dreams, their desires, and their passions – much like most young couple who find themselves in love do. When the sun began creeping over the horizon, it found them curled up asleep in each others arms.

EPILOGUE –THE WHITE TOWER

Arica stood in the immense reception area of the White Tower, waiting patiently for the *Aes Sedai* the young girl who met her had called the Mistress of Novices. She was amazed at the beauty of the building's architecture; the massive pillars and the gloriously sculpted ceiling. The stories claimed that the Tower was build by Ogier in a previous

Age, and from what she had heard of the master builders, she could believe it by what she saw.

Darius shifted nervously beside her, drawing a frown from Rurhic. The Aiel was awestruck by this place, explaining that at some point in their past the Aiel had failed the *Aes Sedai*, and now they hoped above hope that they could make reparations for that. Darius was all too aware that his life was about to undergo a drastic change, and his nerves were finally starting to show through the mask he tried in vain to keep in place.

After several more long moments, a well-built woman bearing the ageless face of a full *Aes Sedai* walked up to them behind the young girl who had gone to fetch her. She stopped and looked at the three in amazement, her eyes sparkling.

“So it’s true then,” the woman said, a note of wonder in her voice. “When Lina here came and told me that there was a young woman here with an Aiel and a Borderlander who wished to join the tower for training, I thought she must have been losing her senses, despite that message Alene Sedai sent me. Yet here you all are, just as she said you would be.”

The woman smiled and looked straight at Arica.

“I am Sheriam Sedai, Mistress of Novices,” she told her pleasantly. “It is my understanding that I won’t have you long, so I have to train you quickly. I hope you’re up to the task.”

Arica gave her a brief but respectful curtsy and smiled back.

“I am Arica Treamon d’Oronarico,” she said in formal tones. “And I am up to any task you wish of me.”

“We shall see about that,” Sheriam commented as she shifted her gaze to the two men. “If you tell me that an Aiel is going to train as a warder, I believe I shall fall over in shock this very second.”

Rurhic stepped forwards and bowed deeply.

“No, *Aes Sedai*,” he said in an even but awed voice. “I merely wished to see Mistress Arica here safely, and will now resume my own affairs.”

Sheriam nodded and looked to Darius.

“The warders train in the area across from us, near the stables,” she told him. “Tell them I sent you and they will put you to work.”

Darius bowed and gave Arica one last look before heading off in the direction Sheriam had told him. Rurhic placed a hand on Arica's shoulder and looked into her eyes.

"May you always find water and shade," he told her solemnly. "And may you always go in the Light."

"And you as well, Rurhic," she replied, tears forming in her eyes. This was really it, then. "And thank you. For everything."

Rurhic gave her a brief smile and turned to the door, not looking back as he left the Tower.

"Now then," Sheriam said after clearing her throat. "Welcome to the White Tower, child. I hope you decide to stay."

Arica puzzled over that comment as she followed Sheriam into the depths of the Tower to where her quarters would be while she was a novice. As she stepped forward into her new life, somewhere far across the land, deep in the wilderness of Arad Doman, an old woman who was not what she appeared smiled and began to laugh.

PART SIX

Dark Secrets

I – THE NOVICE

Arica scowled as she tossed the pot she was washing into the water to rinse. She once again thought that if she had understood what Cadsuane had meant by learning some “much needed discipline” she never would have come here. Since her arrival here at the White Tower in Tar Valon more than two months ago, she had most assuredly been taught that lesson. On more than one occasion she had found herself in the study of the Mistress of Novices, Sheriam Sedai, receiving lashes for some foolish comment that was better off remaining unsaid or some more foolish prank that would have been better off never leaving the conception stage.

This time she found herself washing dirty dishes so she could remember to try and keep her mouth from looking like the insides of these pots. The soap on her tongue was another reminder of the fact that she needed to watch the profanity she allowed to come out across it.

She sighed as she felt the eyes of the large woman who ran the kitchens boring into her back. Even though this was not her first time at this chore, she had never bothered to learn the older woman’s name. What she did remember, though, was that you were almost better off starting a fight with the woman than abusing her precious crockery.

The girl pulled the pot carefully from the rinse water and dried it on a small towel she had at her waist for the purpose. Once she was satisfied that she would not have to repeat washing it – Light knew that the first six times had been bad enough! – she placed it gently on the shelf behind her and turned to the woman who was watching her so intently.

“Have I done to your satisfaction, Mistress?” she asked by rote, her tongue still struggling to overcome the sharp tang that covered it.

“I suppose,” the other woman grunted sourly. “You can go back to your quarters now.”

Arica curtsied deeply, her white novice’s dress billowing out around her. Without another word or a look back, she scurried off through the Tower to the area where quarters were reserved for the *Aes Sedai* novices.

As she walked, she mentally went over her checklist of things to do tonight. This would be one of the last two nights she would be a novice and she had much to do in preparation of the initiation ritual that would raise her to the level of Accepted – just one small step away from being a full *Aes Sedai*.

To her chagrin, she found her thoughts drifting away from the lines she was supposed to remember for the ritual to Darius. She had not seen him except for twice since they arrived. Of those times, she had only had a chance to speak with him once. Novices were forbidden from speaking to anyone other than another novice, an Accepted, or a full *Aes Sedai* unless they had been instructed to do so, so even that one chance had been brief.

He would be well on his way to Saldea by now, off to visit his family before returning to Tar Valon to complete his training with the other warders. He would be back in two month's time, according to what he told her, but it felt like so long until then. At least she would be Accepted by the time he returned, finally risen to the point she could carry on a conversation with him without fear of being dragged away by her ear to Sheriam's study.

With a sigh, she tore her thoughts away from her love and back to the business at hand. It was amazing the amount of things she was expected to learn before being risen to the next level of her training. If there was this much now, she shuddered to imagine what awaited her.

She had had to learn the seven Ajahs and what they stood for. The Ajahs were like factions within the *Aes Sedai*, designated by the color of the shawls each member wore. There were the Whites who followed logic and reasoning to the letter; the Blues who were always looking for ways to better everyone else as well as themselves; the

Yellows and their focus on the arts of healing; the Grays who had mastered the fine art of diplomacy; the Browns with their noses forever stuffed into an old book. The Greens were the ones she felt the most affinity with – the Ajah whose very purpose was to prepare for the coming of *Tarmon Gai'din*, the Last Battle. Perhaps it was that knowledge that they would be going to their probable deaths one day, but the Greens also seemed to be the ones that had the most fun. Some of them had even married their warder, or taken more than one man as their warder. That was what seemed the best fit to her. Of course, it was said that you never chose your Ajah, your Ajah chose you, but that was even appropriate as well, since it was Cadsuane's explanation of why she should come here to begin with that started her down this path.

Of course, that left the Red Ajah. A stern and wooden lot, their purpose was to seek out any man with the ability to channel. They knew all too well that it had been male channellers gone mad who broke the world. They refused to allow this to happen again. Most of them seemed to take their duties to the extreme though; she wasn't aware of very many of them at all that didn't hate all men, not just the ones with the ability to channel. Truth be told, they managed to make her rather nervous, especially when she thought of Ryle out there somewhere ready to slip down that long path into madness.

As she neared her door, she also remembered that there were those who seemed to claim no allegiance to any Ajah. Sheriam Sedai, as Mistress of Novices, seemed to embody aspects of all Ajahs, though Arica believed she had been raised from the Blue. And there was Siuan Sanche – the Amyrlin Seat – of course. As Amyrlin Seat and leader

of the White Tower and therefore all *Aes Sedai* and Tar Valon as well, she was expected to be of all Ajahs and no Ajah as a symbol of her elevation. Her shawl was that of all seven colors rather than one solid one. She also had come from the Blue, if she remembered her lessons correctly.

Arica opened the door and looked around, mildly disappointed that her roommate Nyra was not there. She had been looking forward to talking to her about things she had to learn in these last two days.

Nyra was an Ebou Dari girl a year younger than Arica. She was the daughter of one of the city's most renown herbalists and had been here two days less than Arica had. The girl had reminded her of Moria so much she spent the first night after they had talked together sobbing into her pillow. She had poured out her entire story to the other girl the next night and they had become fast friends. Nyra was usually her partner in the schemes that got her sent to Sheriam's study, and just like old times Arica found herself taking full blame to spare her friend the punishment. She even thought she once heard Sheriam mutter the word "admirable" after she had insisted she acted alone on the prank that had landed her there just before the woman began with her lashes.

She collapsed onto her bed and rolled over onto her back to stare at the ceiling as she continued to review the things she would have to know in the next couple of days.

Some of the things she had learned had been shocking to say the least. Like the fact that once long ago there had been male *Aes Sedai* as well as women. At the end of the Age of Legends, when the Time of Madness began, the men were cast out as the Dark One's taint began to drive them insane. The stories even said that Lews Therin Kinslayer – the first man to be known as Dragon – was an *Aes Sedai* before the madness took him and he slaughtered his entire family, earning the name Kinslayer. It had taken her a good many nights to accept that when the Dragon was reborn, it would not be the same man – at least not entirely – so it would not be an act of foolishness to follow him to *Tarmon Gai'din*.

One of the other things she had learned had nothing to do with the history of the Tower, or even with her lessons on how to wield the One Power. It was the fact that many of the Accepted who presented the lessons seemed to resent her for some reason. It had not taken long to realize that many of them, as well as the *Aes Sedai* themselves, had specific methods they used to weave together the flows to channel. While they would admit that the hand gestures they used were of no real meaning to how to cast the weave, they would also refuse to even attempt to cast it without them. When she was facing Sheriam Sedai for speaking back to an Accepted (to be fair, she had actually told the older girl that she looked like a chicken trying to fly when she cast a weave), the Mistress of Novices had merely explained that many of them were taught by others who only knew how to cast when using the hand gestures. Arica had been spared the lashing when she had prudently asked if this wasn't the same thing as the block she had apparently possessed at some point as a wilder. Sheriam had looked at her and nodded, placing the

lashes down as she said that Arica was correct but that it wouldn't be a good idea to mention it to another Accepted or *Aes Sedai*.

A soft click signaled the door opening, so Arica sat up and stretched as she waited to see who would enter. Most of the *Aes Sedai* and a few of the Accepted seemed to think a Novice's privacy was nothing more than a contradiction in terms, so they didn't bother with knocking when they entered the room. Like most of the rules here, Arica had learned that the hard way as well, since the first time she was sent to Sheriam's study had been for tossing an Accepted out onto her bottom. Sheriam had actually been slightly amused at that one.

To her relief, it was Nyra that entered the room with a soft smile.

"You're back from the kitchens so soon?" the girl asked, a twinkle in her eye.

Arica snorted at the sarcasm.

"I guess that whatever you had for dinner didn't require much preparation since there were fewer pots to clean this time," she told her roommate. "I hope it makes you sick."

The younger girl giggled behind her hand at the comment and sat down on the bed next to Arica.

“Would you have rather been sent to the Mistress of Novices?”

“Almost,” Arica stated seriously. “At least Sheriam and I have gotten to know one another rather well as of late.”

“That’s because you’re always in trouble and being sent to her,” Nyra replied with a smile. “Maybe if I were in there that much, I’d be friends with her too.”

Arica looked at her friend with a smirk.

“Since novices can’t go running around on their own this late, where were you just now?”

Nyra grumbled and moved to the chair in the middle of the room, wincing as she sat down on the hard wood. Arica barked a laugh.

“That’s what I thought! What did you do this time?”

The younger girl frowned and stared at the floor.

“You got caught hanging around watching the warders practice again, didn’t you?”

Nyra's stare bore deeper into the floor. Arica leaned back on her bed and chuckled. This wasn't the first time the girl had been caught out in the yard behind the Tower, staring with interest as the warders ran through their sword drills, often times without their shirts on. Arica found she had no desire to go out and join her friend – not without Darius there, anyway – but she could certainly understand how she felt. Nyra had led a pretty sheltered life in Ebou Dar, even with all the women there wearing clothing almost as scandalous as the Domani. If she had not lived the kind of life she had, she would probably be mooning over the handsome warders in training as well. Especially that dark-haired young man who had come up when Queen Morgase of Andor had visited a week ago – Galad, she thought his name was. He was almost too good-looking for his own good and the fact that he was apparently related to the Queen of Andor was not going to hurt him in the slightest.

It wasn't Galad that Nyra was gazing after, though. It was a young and well-built Cairheinen named Gregor. The man had arrived only a week ago, but Nyra had already been called in front of Sheriam Sedai four times since then for staring at him in the training yard. It wasn't intentional from what Arica could make out – the girl just got lost looking at him.

She thought back to her first crush when she was younger and was amazed to find she could not remember his name. Maybe that was how the Wheel told you who was important to a part of your life and who was incidental. Even though she could not

remember his name, she did remember that she got in trouble more than once for mooning over him instead of doing his chores. If she remembered correctly, the small scar just under her hairline at the back of her neck came from one of those very times. Her head throbbed involuntarily at the memory of her mother knocking her away from the window and into the hearth. At least there wasn't a fire burning at the time.

Breaking out of her own thoughts, Arica noticed the tears standing in her friend's eyes. She got up and crossed to her in a rush, wrapping the girl in her arms and cradling her head against her shoulder.

"Hey!" she exclaimed as she stroked Nyra's hair. "Sheriam isn't that bad. What's wrong?"

Nyra shook her head against Arica's chest and clutched her for all she was worth.

"It isn't the Mistress," she said at last, her voice muffled by the tears and Arica's arm. "I just wonder how much of my life I'm giving up by being here. I'm not even allowed to feel something for someone. How do I even know he realizes I feel like this?"

Arica considered her words carefully. This probably would not be a good time to try and explain to the girl that she was having a bit of an infatuation with Gregor and that it would most likely pass by the end of the month. Something about being here seemed to make time stretch out longer than it normally would, for one thing. For the other, she

doubted the girl wanted to hear the brutal truth in her current state of mind. After thinking quickly, Arica decided to go for the diplomatic route.

“It isn’t that,” she said soothingly. “The *Aes Sedai* just feel that while we’re Novices we should have all distractions kept to a minimum so we don’t lose the control we’re learning.”

The younger girl seemed to mull that over for a moment before responding.

“That’s easy for you to say,” she said, a touch of bitterness entering her voice. “You’re going to be an Accepted in two days and then you can do whatever you want.”

“Is that what you think?” Arica asked her with a mirthless laugh. “I’ll have even less free time as an Accepted than I do as a Novice. I have to teach, for one thing, and I just know I’ll end up with some of the more troublesome girls as students. In case you hadn’t noticed, most of the other Accepted don’t like me very much. They resent the fact that I knew more than most of them do when I first got here. Then there’s all those fun errands that the Accepted get to do for the full sisters. I’ll be lucky to find time to sleep and continue my own studies, much less time for anything else.”

Feeling her roommate relax slightly in her arms, Arica felt it would be okay to try a dash of humor as well.

“Besides,” she continued, a slow smile creeping across her face. “It was probably some Red that turned you in anyway, jealous because she could never get a man to look at her for any reason. And do you really want to tear yourself up over some dough-faced fancy-pants who will probably get kicked out of the city before the next week is out?”

The attempt worked as Arica felt her friend shuddering with barely contained laughter.

“You need a man who can control you, not some pretty boy that will fall apart at the first crisis,” she continued, loosening her grip on Nyra. “Can you imagine? ‘Oh, Gregor, I wish to kiss you.’ ‘Not right now, dearest Nyra, you’ll mess up my hair.’ Is that what you want? You need a man who acts like a man.”

“Like Darius, you mean?” Nyra asked through her giggles. Arica snorted.

“Darius couldn’t control me if I gave him written instructions,” she replied, pleased that the storm seemed to have passed. “It would surprise me if he could control any woman. Ask him sometime who made the first move in our relationship.”

“Light,” the girl said with a chuckle. “Not that story again.”

Arica pushed her away gently and gave a half-hearted sniff. The two stared at each other for several moments before Nyra broke the silence.

“Thank you, Arica,” she said, her eyes sparkling with the remaining tears standing in them. “Thanks for pulling me back together.”

Arica shook the compliment off with a smile.

“That’s what friends are for,” she said, slightly embarrassed. “Now help me study so I can have less free time.”

Nyra had been asleep for several hours by the time Arica finally laid down and closed her eyes. She had been up reviewing everything she could think of so when Sheriam sat her down tomorrow she would be able to snap out the answers as fast as the Mistress could ask the questions. Her mind was swimming with the information she had crammed into it, so much so that it was nearly First Bell by the time she managed to drift into a troubled sleep.

Arica had been having a hard time sleeping for the last several days, though she was unable to determine exactly why. She had been a bit stressed out by the impending initiation ritual, but she had been nervous before and never had trouble sleeping like this. Every time she did manage to fall asleep, she was plagued with nightmares; horrible dreams of herself trapped in the web of a giant spider. There was a beautiful blonde woman there, thick without being fat, just enough to make her more voluptuous than she

would have been without the weight. The woman kept saying something to her as she hung in the web, something about how it was best she remembered nothing so she could never end up in this position, but whenever she awoke she was unable to remember the specifics.

Tonight was no exception. Arica awoke in a cold sweat, her heart beating in her chest like a drum. She peeled off her sweat-drenched shift and stood for a moment, allowing the gentle breeze that wafted through the open window to dry her skin. She pulled her white Novice's dress over her head and left the room quickly, taking care not to wake Nyra as she closed the door behind her.

Alene Sedai had come to visit Arica on more than one occasion since her arrival at the White Tower. The *Aes Sedai* had impressed the importance of not letting anyone know that Cadsuane had sent her here, nor that Alene Sedai had any connections to Cadsuane at all either. She had also made sure that Arica knew her door was always open should she need to talk to someone who understood more of the situation, even going so far as to insist that Sheriam Sedai did not punish Arica if she ever took advantage of the offer.

Arica had never felt the need to go to Alene, but she was sick and tired of the dreams she was having. She was positive they were linked to that missing period of her life where she had learned to channel, and wanted to talk to someone who knew the

whole story. She had wanted to discuss it with Sheriam, but Alene had insisted she keep that quiet as well. The fact that she was to be raised an Accepted was enough of a scandal for the normally quiet confines of the Tower, the last thing that was needed was for stories that the girl who was apparently so special didn't even remember having learned what she knew.

The door swung open after only one brief and quiet knock, revealing the older *Aes Sedai* in her shift with a concerned look on her ageless face. She took in Arica's disheveled appearance in one glance and ushered the girl in without a word.

"What's wrong?" Alene Sedai asked once she had shut the door behind her and whispered something under her breath. Arica felt the change in the air as the weave settled into place. "Has something happened?"

In a rush, Arica poured out her problem sleeping and the nightmares she endured when she did sleep. She finished by asking if this was in fact related to her forgotten training, but the other woman merely rose and crossed to the window, her face an unreadable mask and her thoughts carefully hidden.

"Semirhage and Graendal," Arica finally heard her mutter softly, the girl's blood turning to ice at the mention of the names of two of the Forsaken. Until recently, Arica had believed the Forsaken to be nothing more than another legend – the idea of not just one but thirteen individuals who gave up their existence to serve the Dark One as his

personal servants was just too much to accept at face value – but had learned during her studies that they were very real and would reappear just before the Dark One was freed from his prison to begin the preparations for *Tarmon Gai'din*. They were the first signs that the seals on his prison were weakening.

“What did you say?” Arica demanded once she regained her voice. “Are you trying to tell me the Forsaken are responsible for my missing memory?”

Alene turned to face her, her face indistinguishable in the shadows cast from being so close to the window.

“Just idle thoughts,” the woman assured her. “Truthfully, I don’t know what is responsible for your missing period of time. But based on the dreams you just explained to me, it would seem that the Forsaken have taken an interest in you. Perhaps you have a latent talent for Foretelling. It is something not seen for many years – in fact only Elaida Sedai seems to show any small touch of the ability – but it is not unheard of. It could be a vision that you will encounter those two at a later date.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?” Arica asked, her voice doing little to hide her annoyance.

“No,” Alene responded unceremoniously. “It is merely a statement of possibility. Would you rather know you had been touched by servants of the Dark One or know you may face them one day?”

Finding she had no answer for that, Arica remained silent.

“For now,” the woman continued, “I believe I can teach you something to help you sleep. It is a ward to protect your dreams from outside influence. I will alert Sheriam Sedai that you are not feeling well and that I have ordered you to get some rest so you can be prepared to be raised as Accepted tomorrow. Now pay attention.”

Arica watched closely as the woman showed her how to cast the weave that would keep her dreams safe. She returned to her own room and tried the weave before lying down and trying to sleep again.

Much to her surprise, she awoke several hours later feeling better than she had in a long time and having no memories of any nightmares for a change.

II – INITIATION

Arica stood next to Sheriam, her eyes sweeping over the massive chamber built directly into the bedrock that comprised the foundation underneath the White Tower. The room was another example of the precision that went into the building’s architecture,

another sign of the work of the Ogier. The lighting was provided by softly burning lamps at various points along the walls of the circular room, their shadows giving it a depth that made it appear larger than it was.

In the center of the room was a large silver structure that caught her eyes immediately. It was three tall arches, more than large enough for a grown woman to walk through, connected to a circular base that appeared to be made of the same material. There was no evidence of a connection at those points, giving the impression that this had been constructed as one piece, arches and base together.

Seated at the places where the arches and base met were three *Aes Sedai* in their brightly colored shawls. The one closest to the door was wearing blue, another wore green, and the last wore a bright yellow. Their eyes were closed and their faces set in deep concentration. Arica knew from her studies that the structure was an immense *ter'angreal*, an object whose construction that had been lost in a long-ago Age that possessed unknown abilities from the One Power. The three women surrounding it were providing it with a connection to *saidar* so it could function.

Off to one side of the arches stood another *Aes Sedai* watching protectively over a low table on which rested three silver chalices. Arica knew these played some part in the ceremony, and that the sister standing near them – a Brown in this instance – was the one who was for all intents and purposes in charge of the ritual.

A small tremor slipped through her body as she realized that this was the moment of no return for her. Once she stepped through those arches, she would have committed herself fully to this endeavor. She had been awakened in the middle of the night by Sheriam Sedai, momentarily upset at the woman's statement that the time waited on no woman when it came. She had been anxiously waiting for this moment the entire day, mildly displeased that she had been forgotten when it became full dark and she drifted off to sleep. But all of that was forgotten as she stood at the edge of this extremely important moment.

Sheriam leaned closer to her and cleared her throat, drawing Arica's attention away from the room and back to her.

"You will have three chances at this," Sheriam began, her voice taking on a tone that indicated the ritual had now begun. "As do all novices. This would be only the first time; you can still have two other chances here. If you refuse a third time, however, you will be kindly removed from the Tower with enough silver to help you on your way. There is no shame in refusing; I could not do this my first time."

"I will not refuse," Arica said firmly. She swallowed hard and tried to prepare herself.

"Good," Sheriam replied, her voice a ritual mask. "I will now tell you two things no woman hears until she stands where you do now. First, once you begin you must

continue through to the end. Falter once and you shall be put out of the Tower as if you had refused for the third time. Second. To seek, to strive, is to know danger. Some women have entered and never come out. When the *ter'angreal* was allowed to become quiet, they – were – not – there. And they were never seen again. If you will survive, you must be steadfast. Falter, fail, and....”

Sheriam did not complete the sentence, but her face drove the words home as if she had. Arica understood clearly what the Mistress of Novices was saying to her.

“This is your last chance to refuse and have it count as only the first. You may still try twice more. Accept, and there will be no turning back. Choose.”

Arica shivered but looked at the other woman steadily.

“I accept.”

Sheriam nodded. “Then ready yourself.”

As she had been taught to do, Arica slipped her shift over her head and folded it neatly before placing it on the floor next to her. Her slippers followed and she stepped forward onto stone that felt like a block of ice. With a nod, Sheriam began walking forward at a slow and even pace.

“Whom do you bring with you, Sister?” the Brown intoned.

Sheriam’s pace never faltered as she answered.

“One who comes as a candidate for Acceptance, Sister.”

“Is she ready?”

“She is ready to leave behind what she was, and, passing through her fears, gain Acceptance.”

“Does she know her fears?”

“She has never faced them, but now is willing.”

“Then let her face what she fears.”

Sheriam turned to address Arica, her eyes filled with sympathy and her voice steady.

“The first time is for what was. The way back will come but once. Be steadfast.”

Arica nodded, and after taking a deep breath, stepped through the first archway.

Blinding white light crashed into her eyes as she entered, causing her to close them tightly and throw her hands up in defense. Once she felt safe enough to open them again, she found herself standing in a prison cell, a faint light drifting through the small window behind her. A clamor from down the hallway drew her attention to the barred door in front of her.

A moment later, her mother's face appeared in the small opening in the door.

"I knew it would come to this," the woman said, the spite dripping from each word. "I tried to teach you, but would you listen?"

"Mother, I...", she began, her voice trembling.

"Save it," her mother spat out, cutting her off. "Your worthless little friend dead, and now this on top of it? How could you? How could you try to kill that sweet man?"

Arica's mind swam with the implications of that statement. She had killed Lord Draven and fled this place that very night – hadn't she?

The way back will come but once...

Her mother shook her head slowly.

“Now you will face the judgment of the mayor, and good riddance to you on that. Why, if that soldier hadn’t come in to check on Lord Draven, I shudder to think what you would have done.”

“I would have killed him is what!” Arica exclaimed. This couldn’t be happening. “He killed Mori!”

“Moria went to him of her own accord. How dare you accuse him of such a thing?”

Tears streamed from Arica’s face as she sat down hard on the thin cot that was to be her bed until the time of judgment. Moria was dead, and now the man responsible was going to get away with it.

“I *did* kill him,” she whispered helplessly. “I know I did.”

“You must have lost your senses, child,” her mother replied, laughing. “This very moment he is with the mayor, begging him to be lenient with you. I hope he fails. You will probably hang for it.”

Arica moaned in frustration.

“Ask Moria’s mother!” she cried, inspiration striking her and offering her this one chance. “She knows the truth!”

Her mother laughed again.

“She hopes you hang as well, for not protecting her daughter well enough. ‘She was Moria’s friend’ is what she told me. ‘Why didn’t she warn her?’”

A man’s voice muttered something to Arica’s mother as the girl covered her face in her hands and wept bitterly. This was all wrong; she knew what she had done. Wasn’t the loss of her friend punishment enough?

The face of one of the guards replaced her mother at the door.

“It’s time,” he said simply, opening the door and claspings the shackles around her wrists. “The mayor’s waiting.”

She was led out of the cell and into the small room that served as both the meeting area for the local militia and the Hall of Judgment, when it was actually needed. The mayor was sitting in his normal place at the far end of the room, staring straight ahead with the look of a man who has been tasked to a job he very much disliked. To his right

sat another man, the sight of which caused Arica to miss a step and suck in a startled breath.

“You can’t be here!” she cried in vain. “I killed you!”

Lord Draven smiled and held his seat.

“I can assure you I am very much alive, girl,” he replied coolly. “Despite your best efforts.”

“Enough of this,” the mayor said with a huff. “Step forward to receive your judgment.”

The way back will come but once...

Arica was pulled forward by the guard holding the chain attached to her wrists. She stumbled and nearly fell, managing to catch her balance at the last instant. Rage boiled inside her as she stared at the man responsible for the death of her best friend – her sister, blood relations be damned – as he sat smugly on the small dais. Her hands worked furiously in front of her, trapped in the shackles. If only she could get free of the guard who held them....

She watched and waited as the man led her forward and leaned down to the small pole in the ground to fasten the chain in place to hold her through the sentencing. His attention was diverted for only a moment, but that was all the time she needed. With a massive roar that surprised even her, she leapt forwards towards Draven's seat.

Her chain was just tightening in the loop she had made around his neck when she noticed a shimmering doorway on the other side of the room. As she watched, the doorway began to gradually shrink, growing smaller by the moment.

The way back will come but once...

With an effort, she pulled away from the man who killed her friend and ruined her life. She sprinted the length of the room, diving for the doorway in the instant it began to slam shut. She was just wondering if she was going to make it when it snapped fully closed and her chest exploded in pain and pressure.

Arica crashed to the ground on the other side of the arch she had entered through, her chest hitting the ground with enough force to drive the breath from her lungs. She lay there collecting herself for a moment before rising to her knees to face Sheriam, who wore a look of sympathy and concern. A cold rush of water washed her tears from her face as the Brown Sister emptied the first silver chalice over her head.

“You are washed clean,” the woman intoned. “Of what sin you may have done, and of those done against you. You are washed clean of what crime you may have committed, and of those committed against you. You come to us washed clean and pure, in heart and soul.”

She was mildly surprised to discover that she did feel forgiven for what had happened to Moria, and to Lord Draven afterwards, but it did little to reassure her soul from the torment it had just endured.

“Was it real?” she asked Sheriam softly. “Did that really happen just now?”

“Every woman I have seen pass through these arches has asked that question,” Sheriam replied. “The truth is, no one knows. Some have said that those who entered and did not return found a happier place and lived out the remainder of their lives there. I cannot say for certain. I myself believe it is not real. But the danger is. Remember that the danger you experience is very real.”

The Mistress of Novices stepped to the entrance of the second light-filled arch.

“Are you ready?”

Arica nodded and joined her, her eyes studying the archway warily.

“The second time is for what is. The way back will come but once. Be steadfast.”

With an effort, Arica propelled herself through the second arch.

The horse came to a stop as Arica pulled the reigns hard. For a moment she was having a hard time remembering how she even got here, but with a shake of her head, she decided it was just her mind playing tricks on her after the long ride so far.

Darius had already dismounted and now held a hand up to help her down as well. She took the hand and dropped into the embrace of the man who stood before her. She smiled up at him affectionately and gave him a light kiss.

“We should be in Saldea in another day or so,” he told her once the kiss broke. “Then we can settle down and enjoy the things that newly married people are supposed to enjoy, my heart.”

Arica smiled again and snuggled closer to him.

“Good,” she said softly. “I’m getting tired of sleeping on the ground. A proper bed will be a welcome change.”

He kissed her again and broke the embrace to begin making camp for the night. She watched him as he worked, the muscles in his back rippling through the thin jerkin he wore. The weather was unseasonably hot, so the sweat had glued it against his firm shoulders, making it easy to see the strength his physical body possessed.

The way back will come but once. Be steadfast.

Casting one last look back, Arica turned and stretched. The trip had been a long one, but at least it was nearly over. The Light had been with them, at least, since they had been mercifully spared any encounters with the increasing number of bandits that had been plaguing most of the other main roads across the land. They had made it almost into the Borderlands and had not seen one group yet. She felt it was just providence – the Light protecting those who were blissful in its warmth – but Darius had a darker view on the matter. He felt it was the nearness to the Blight and the many Trollocs that came down from the barren lands that kept the brigands at bay.

A shiver ran down her spine at the thought of the Shadowspawn so close by, but her fear was replaced with concern as she noticed Darius's head jerk upright and begin scanning the woods around them.

“What is it, my love?” she asked, a tremble creeping into her voice. Perhaps the trip would not be entirely without incident.

Darius held up a hand, indicating for her to be quiet for a moment.

“Maybe nothing,” he whispered, just loud enough for her to hear. “I thought I heard something.”

Arica held her tongue and suppressed another shiver. Darius might be trying to play it calm, but she knew him well enough to know better. Sometimes the man’s instincts were as finely honed as a wolf’s, and if he thought he heard something, in all likelihood he had.

He was just beginning to pull his sword from its sheathe at his side when the woods erupted around them. Hideous monstrosities poured forth, creatures that appeared to be a combination of several other creatures put together in a nightmare pattern.

“Trollocs!” Arica cried, her fear implanting itself fully in her mind freezing her to the spot she was standing.

Darius had his sword out now, swinging it for all he was worth, but the numbers were overwhelming. For every one of the monsters he cut down, six more took its place. Arica looked on in horror as one of the creatures drove its midnight black sword into her husband’s stomach. The man crumpled to the ground with an agonized scream as the skies lit up with streaks of brilliant blue lightning.

The way back will come but once. Be steadfast.

The lightning bolts began to strike the ground around her, exploding Trollocs like a display by the Illuminator's Guild. After what seemed like an eternity, Arica opened her eyes to witness the carnage left behind. The skies were quiet once more, but the effects of whatever had occurred were evident in the charred corpses littering the clearing that once seemed so peaceful and still. She willed her legs to move and was grateful that they cooperated. She raced to her fallen love and cradled his head in her lap.

"It burns," he muttered. "Light, it burns."

Through her tears, Arica noticed an opening filled with a brilliant silver light on the other side of the clearing. To her amazement, this was not as frightening as it seemed like it should be. In fact, there was something about the gateway that seemed important, even though she could not place exactly what.

"The next village," Darius rasped. "Get me to the next village. I feel like I'm dying."

Arica was sure of that. The blood that poured from the wound was a deep red, and the ground beneath him was already sodden with it. She glanced from her husband to the gateway and back again, torn for reasons she could never begin to explain. Something inside her clicked, and she made her decision.

She placed Darius's head gently onto the ground and brushed his lips with one last kiss before hurling herself towards the shimmering gateway with a sob.

"Arica, wait!" Darius cried weakly. "Don't leave me!"

Everything else he said was lost as the blinding light tore her into miniscule fibers and transported her across space and time before rebuilding her on the other side.

Arica stumbled to her knees as she exited the archway, tears streaming down her face. The Brown sister was there almost immediately, tipping the second silver chalice over her head and allowing the cool water to wash the teardrops from her face.

"You are washed clean of false pride," she intoned over Arica's sobs. "You are washed clean of false ambition. You come to us washed clean, in heart and soul."

The sister moved away and Sheriam knelt beside Arica.

"I hate you," Arica told her through the tears. "To make someone endure that... it's cruel! I hate you all for it!"

Sheriam gave her a wistful smile.

“Most of the women who go through this experience express the same opinion of it. There is one more archway left, and then it will be over except in memories. Are you ready?”

Arica wavered as she stood, then caught her balance and nodded, droplets of water splashing from her hair.

“I know it’s difficult, child,” Sheriam said kindly. “And custom dictates that you need not tell of what you experience. A woman’s fears are her own. But you are facing them bravely, and you are almost finished.”

Sheriam led her to the final archway, facing the shimmering light with her.

“The third time is for what will be. The way back will come but once. Be steadfast.”

With great effort, Arica took the final steps towards her goal.

The brightness of the archway faded into a darkness so complete that for a moment Arica was sure she had been struck blind. She closed her eyes tightly and reopened them, hoping it would help them adjust, but to no avail. Her ears seemed to be

working, but then again there really was not any sound to be able to tell one way or the other.

Arica wasn't sure how long she stood there in the blackness before a faint light appeared far ahead of her. Carefully, she began to make her way towards it, wincing at each step, expecting it to take her teetering over the edge of some steep, unseen precipice. The closer she got to the light, the more it appeared to be emanating from a blonde woman wearing a white dress that left little to the imagination.

The woman was slightly plump in a voluptuous way rather than fat, but the extra weight merely added to the beauty instead of detracting from it. Her long hair drifted behind her as if tossed by a soft breeze and Arica had to rub her eyes before she could accept the fact that her dress didn't move at all, though if there were a breeze it should.

“Who are you?” Arica asked. “Where is this place?”

The woman smiled.

“Don't you recognize me, my dear?”

Arica's mouth dropped open as she noticed that the woman standing before her was old and frail, her clothing nothing at all like she had originally thought. Rather than

outright beauty, the woman was possessed of a quiet dignity that made her attractive in a different manner than the physical.

The way back will come but once. Be steadfast.

The woman was also strangely familiar, though Arica was having a hard time placing her. She felt like this woman played some sort of major role in her life, but she could not even place a name to the face. The other woman cackled maniacally as Arica struggled to come up with where she knew her from.

“Oh yes, you wouldn’t remember me, would you?” the woman snickered. “It appears I did quite a nice little job in making you forget.”

The woman crossed the few steps to where Arica was standing without even moving, or so it seemed. She cupped the young girl’s face in her hand and tilted it up to stare her directly in the eye.

“At least you followed the path I hoped you would,” the old woman continued. “I’m pleased that I didn’t have to implant that suggestion as well. No matter. You are here because you are being raised to Accepted of the *Aes Sedai*. It should be some time yet before they raise you to the shawl, so we have plenty of time to accomplish my humble little goals.”

Arica's mouth worked silently as her mind raced with the words this old woman was telling her.

"Who are you?" she finally managed to croak through her tightened throat.

The old woman considered the question for a moment before answering.

"Such a pretty little thing. I suppose there is no harm in you knowing that now. The one thing they could possibly do to change things – should they believe you at all, since no one believes this place to be real – they would never ever do. I am known by many names, but you may call me Graendal."

As soon as the name was spoken, Arica felt chills run down her spine. One of the Forsaken! She was standing here face to face with one of the most powerful of the Dark One's servants! And to make matters worse, the thing was implying that she was using Arica as a tool against the White Tower!

With a scream of desperation, Arica embraced the source and quickly wove together what she had been taught was a shield to prevent another woman from channeling. No sooner had she thrown the weave at the Forsaken before her did she feel the threads sliced apart as neatly as a seamstress cutting fabric.

“Come now,” Graendal said mockingly. “Do you really think you can do anything like that to me?”

Before she had a chance to react, Arica felt her arms and legs snap against her body and her connection to *saidar* snapped. She stared at the woman who had now reverted back to the beautiful creature she had first encountered here in utter disbelief.

“That is the proper way to shield someone. I am rather impressed that your puny attempt to channel in this place did not burn the ability out of you, though.”

Graendal turned to regard a shimmering gateway that had opened beside her.

“It is time for you to go, child,” she told Arica calmly. “Go and become Accepted. When I have need of you, I will call you in the other world. Be ready. I do not condone failure.”

Arica was off and running the moment she felt the evil woman’s weave drop. With a terrified scream, she leaped through the gateway, the cruel laughter of the Forsaken ringing in her ears.

She hit the floor of the chamber beneath the White Tower with a massive thud before rebounding to her feet as if she were a wound spring. She looked around into the

concerned and shocked faces of the *Aes Sedai* who had administered the tests to her, as well as that of the Amyrlin Seat herself.

“Are you all right, child?” Sheriam asked as she rushed to her side.

“I know!” Arica cried out, her eyes wild with terror. “I know who taught me! Light help me, I’m a tool of the Dark One!”

Sheriam fell back a step at the proclamation before looking to the Amyrlin. Sivan Sanche stood regally as she had before, the only indication of her amazement a slight tilt of her lips.

“She has come this far,” Sivan said, her voice sounding calm but with a hint of worry lining it. “We must complete the ceremony. Then we can determine if the Dark One has managed to slip a silverpike into our nets.”

The Mistress of Novices nodded before turning back to Arica and leading her to kneel before the Amyrlin. The Brown sister raced over with the final chalice, handing it to the Amyrlin who poured it slowly over Arica’s head.

“You are washed clean of Arica Treamon d’Oronarico from Arad Doman,” she said firmly. “You are washed clean of all ties that bind you to the world. You come to us

washed clean, in heart and soul. You are Arica Treamon d'Oronarico, Accepted of the White Tower. You are sealed to us, now."

The Amyrlin pulled her to her feet and kissed her softly on each cheek.

"Welcome, Daughter," Suan told her. "Welcome."

The Amyrlin stepped back and looked at Sheriam levelly.

"Get her dry and into her clothes, then bring her to my study immediately. No one in this room is to speak of anything she has heard here tonight. I fear some strong decisions must be made this night and I'll not have anyone running their mouths off about matters that need not be brought to light. Do I make myself clear?"

Arica could hear the murmurs of "Yes, Mother" scattered across the room. Suan Sanche gave her one last studious look before turning and making her way up the ramp to her study.

"Come on, child," Sheriam said warily. "We don't want to keep the Mother waiting."

As she allowed herself to be dressed in the traditional white dress with the seven colored bands along the hem and the serpent ring that set her apart as a member of the White Tower, Arica could not help but wonder if her life had just gotten easier or harder.

III – HARD CHOICES

“A girl taught to channel by one of the Forsaken now an Accepted of the Tower. *Tarmon Gai’din* is surely upon us.”

Siuan Sanche – the Amyrlin Seat, Keeper of the Seals and the Flame of Tar Valon – turned to face the small group assembled in her study in the dead of night. Luane was her Keeper of the Chronicles and was here mainly to witness the discussion. Sheriam and Alene were here to try and help decide what must be done with this girl. Only four of them to make a decision that may well hold the fate of the entire White Tower in its clutches. This was not the way the Tairen woman had hoped to spend her evening.

Following the initiation, Siuan had returned here and summoned Alene. She had seen the Blue sister talking to the new Accepted on other occasions and knew she was the one who had brought the girl here to begin with. At least the other woman was genuinely shocked when Siuan had revealed what the girl said to her. Luane had led Sheriam and the girl in shortly after Alene had arrived and then the real frights had come.

The girl had broken down in tears for most of the meeting, describing through her sobs her encounter in the final archway and then her newfound memories of how she learned to channel. Rather than make the decisions easier, she had managed to make them harder.

Siuan sighed as she took her seat behind the massive desk that filled the center of the room. If the girl had been anything other than purely terrified, she would have been put out of the Tower immediately. But it was obvious that this Arica was not a willing servant of the Dark One, merely in the wrong place at the wrong time.

“I never thought Graendal would be the type to actually help someone else,” Sheriam was saying. “It is so out of character from what we knew of her.”

“How much can we really claim to know of the Forsaken?” Alene asked calmly. “It seems to me that she didn’t help Arica so much as she put her own plan into motion using her as nothing more than a catalyst.”

“Why one of the flaming Forsaken did something is not the question here,” Siuan interjected firmly. “The question is what we do about the girl who is sitting in her quarters waiting for the command that will start her bringing the Tower down around our ears.”

The Amyrlin shook her head forlornly.

“This is not just a single silverpike in the nets; this is a whole bloody school of them.”

The other three women looked at her silently, wisely keeping their mouths shut. Suan had worked hard at cleaning up her language after being raised to the shawl, especially once she had been appointed Amyrlin Seat, but when she was extremely angry or frustrated, her filthy tongue still managed to slip through.

Alene leaned forwards in her seat and looked Suan in the eye.

“There is one solution to this,” she said calmly. “One way to allow her to remain in the Tower and insure our safety in the process.”

“What would that be?” Suan asked, sarcasm dripping from the words like water from the sides of a boat. “Kill her and keep her corpse here?”

Sheriam and Luane both looked shocked, but Alene managed to keep her calm.

“No, Mother,” she said. “Raise her to the shawl as soon as possible.”

“What?” Sheriam exclaimed as she leapt from her seat. “She has just become Accepted and told us she was Taught by one of the Forsaken and now you want to give her free run of the Tower?”

Siuan silenced her with a motion of her hand and appeared thoughtful.

“Luane,” she asked finally. “What do you think about Alene’s idea?”

The Keeper of the Chronicles straightened her blue-fringed shawl over her shoulders and looked up at the Amyrlin.

“It does make a kind of sense if you think about it,” she said at last. “The Oath Rod would break any allegiances the girl has with the Forsaken, even if she was a willing participant, which we do not believe to be the case.”

Siuan fingered her chin thoughtfully as Sheriam resumed her seat. This was an extreme case, so extreme measures were called for. It was not lost on her that the Tower needed more *Aes Sedai* if there was any hope of success at *Tarmon Gai’din*. And this girl had managed to channel while in the arches, a feat almost unheard of in her time here. Any other woman who tried had come out with the ability burned out of them like a dying flame. The Oath Rod should do exactly what Alene Sedai was suggesting – remove any chance of the girl following the orders of the Forsaken. There really were not any options here. If they cast the girl out of the Tower, she would still be under the control of

one of the Forsaken. If they locked her up, she may well have help in escaping, not to mention the chance of innocence. Killing her was something that could be done – similar things had been done in the past without word getting out that the Tower was behind it – but then again the girl had done nothing wrong save a lapse of judgment.

“Perhaps you have the solution, Daughter,” Siuan told Alene. “But I have to wonder what you have up your sleeve.”

Alene gave the Amyrlin a look of shock.

“Mother!” she exclaimed. “I have no idea what you’re saying!”

“Save it,” Siuan shot back, her hackles beginning to rise. “I’ve heard rumors that you’ve been hanging around a certain old *Aes Sedai* who marches to her own drum, and one who snubs their nose at the customs of the Tower as well. I’d lay my finest fishing rod that the old woman has something sneaky in mind, and I don’t intend to let her circumvent the rules here as long as I am Amyrlin!”

Alene leaned back in her chair and studied Siuan closely. Finally she sighed and threw her hands up in frustration.

“Cadsuane hasn’t got any grand scheme in mind, Mother,” she said. “I think she’s gone off in search of the Dragon Reborn again, truth be told. I have not spoken with her

in some time. All I know is that she took an immediate liking to that girl and convinced her to come here for training to become an *Aes Sedai*. She didn't plant me here to bring her in and get her raised as soon as possible for some grand master plan. I suggested raising her to the shawl simply because it would solve the problem with the least amount of permanent damage being inflicted on Arica."

Siu'an smiled at the Blue sister.

"It takes some work to get you going, but once you start you don't hold back," she said with a chuckle. "So be it. We shall raise the girl to the shawl in a week's time. That way she can get some specialized training from you directly, Alene, so we can be sure it won't be a mistake."

Siu'an allowed her hand to creep to the small box that rested on her desk. The contents of the box were known to none but her, and she knew that if this girl had anything to connect her to the events that were listed on the scraps of paper in the box, things were getting worse much more rapidly than she would have liked.

Much too rapidly indeed.

Arica pulled away slightly from the embrace Nyra held her in. She had come straight back to her old room in the Novice's quarters after she left the Amyrlin's study

and collapsed into her friend's arms before bursting into tears once more. She was sure she had cried more tonight than she ever had before, and was mildly surprised that there were any tears left in her.

She had poured out the events of the night, fully expecting Nyra to break and run once she learned that a Forsaken had taught her what she knew of channeling. Much as Rurhic had surprised her once before, however, her friend had held her tighter and assured her that she was not a monster and that the *Aes Sedai* would find some way of freeing her from the horror she had endured.

"It's not as if you sought the Forsaken out and asked her to teach you," Nyra said soothingly, looking into Arica's eyes with a deep compassion that was much too mature for her age. "The Amyrlin Seat is wise enough to know the difference as well."

Arica nodded and brushed the tears from her cheeks.

"Maybe you're right," she said bitterly. "But it doesn't change the fact that I was taught by a servant of the Dark One himself."

"Does it matter who taught you as long as you do the right thing with what you learned?" Nyra asked.

Arica did not have an immediate response to that. The girl was right – she knew that on a conscious level – but it did not make it any easier to bear.

Her head jerked up at a soft knock on the door. Alene Sedai stuck her head in and smiled when she saw Arica. The *Aes Sedai* came into the room and shut the door behind her with a gentle push.

“I thought I might find you here, so I didn’t even bother coming to your new rooms,” she said, her eyes filled with kindness. “I thought you might like to know that the Amyrlin has reached a decision about you.”

Nyra rose and started towards the door until a hand on her arm stopped her.

“Stay,” Arica said softly. “You are my closest friend here, so I want you with me when I hear this.”

After looking to Alene for confirmation, Nyra resumed her seat next to Arica on the bed and held her hand tightly in both of hers. Both girls looked at the *Aes Sedai*, expectancy and dread filling both their faces.

“We know of only one thing that could possibly break the hold a Forsaken has on you,” Alene said as she smoothed her skirts over her legs. “And that is to swear the Three Oaths on the Oath Rod. That can only happen in one instance.”

She looked at both girls before focusing on Arica.

“That instance is when a woman is raised to the shawl. You will swear the oaths in one week.”

It took a moment for Arica to comprehend what she was being told. When it clicked, she looked at the Blue sister in disbelief.

“I am to be raised a full *Aes Sedai* in a week?” she asked, her mind spinning with the revelation.

“That is correct,” Alene said simply. “I am to train you in the things you must know between now and that time.”

Arica looked over at Nyra to find the other girl looking as stunned as she felt. Nyra turned back to her and gave her a broad grin before wrapping her in another embrace, this one for celebration rather than comfort.

“Arica, this is wonderful,” Nyra exclaimed. “Your dream is coming true!”

Arica didn't even have a chance to nod before her eyes rolled up and she fainted dead away from shock.

IV – AES SEDAI

Arica waited patiently with Alene outside the massive double doors to the Amyrlin Seat's private study. Alene had crammed as much knowledge into a weeks worth of teaching as most other *Aes Sedai* received in several years and her mind swam trying to remember it all.

She was still trying to recall the concentration techniques she had learned when the doors opened and the Keeper of the Chronicles emerged, her staff of office held tightly in her right hand.

“The Mother is ready for you now,” the Keeper said in formal tones. “You must enter alone and leave behind all that you were so you may emerge renewed.”

With a final glance at Alene, Arica stepped through the doors and into the study. As the doors closed behind her, she walked to the center of the room and stood facing the Amyrlin's desk, her head held high. Siuan Sanche looked up and nodded as she rose from her seat behind the desk. She held a long and ornate wooden rod in her hands.

“This is not something that is done,” the Amyrlin told her as she approached. “But there is no other way except for death. What is done here cannot be undone, save by stilling you, but you would do well to remember the circumstances in which you were

raised until you have established yourself as trustworthy and true in your path. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mother," Arica replied with a tremble in her voice. "I understand."

Siu'an held out the wooden rod and looked Arica in the eyes.

"Under the circumstances, you will be required to swear one additional oath. Remember that this rod will bind the oaths bone deep, and they will not be easily broken if you can manage to break them at all. Take hold of this rod in both hands and repeat after me: I swear to never speak any word that is not true."

Arica held the Oath Rod as she was told and looked back at the Amyrlin levelly.

"I swear to never speak any word that is not true."

As soon as the words left her tongue, she felt the touch of *saidar* embed the oath into her very soul. She knew without a doubt that from that moment forwards, she would do only as she had sworn just now.

"I swear to never make a weapon for one man to kill another," Siu'an continued.

"I swear to never make a weapon for one man to kill another."

“I swear to never use the One Power as a weapon except against shadowspawn or in the last extreme defense of my life, the life of my warder, or the life of another sister.”

“I swear to never use the One Power as a weapon except against shadowspawn or in the last extreme defense of my life, the life of my warder, or the life of another sister.”

“And now,” Siuan said with a sigh. “The final oath, and the one that is required for you alone: I swear to follow only the path of the Light and to never be bound by the Dark One or his servants, the Forsaken.”

Arica swallowed and repeated the words exactly: “I swear to follow only the path of the Light and never to be bound by the Dark One or his servants, the Forsaken.”

Once she swore the oath, pain like she had never known ripped into her mind, driving her to her knees. She tried to scream but found she could not seem to pull in enough breath to do so. Black spots danced in front of her eyes as she struggled to take in air. Her head slipped down to the smooth marble floor and the world slipped away for a long time.

When she finally awoke, she saw Siuan Sanche kneeling over her, her face a mask of determination and concern. The Amyrlin took in a deep breath when she saw Arica's eyes open.

“Thank the Light, Daughter,” Siuan muttered. “I was afraid that breaking the compulsion had killed you.”

Arica managed a smile and tried to sit up.

“You can't get rid of me that easily, Mother,” she replied, her brain feeling filled with nothingness making her giddy. The Amyrlin snorted.

“Let's finish this so you can go get some rest, child,” Siuan said stiffly. “Have you decided on an Ajah?”

Her mind beginning to function properly again, Arica straightened and answered formally.

“I wish to apply for acceptance in the Green, Mother.”

“Then pending final approval by the sitters of your chosen Ajah, I hereby proclaim you no longer Arica Treamon D'Oronarico, Accepted of the White Tower, but now Arica

Treamon D'Oronarico *Aes Sedai*, Sister of the Green Ajah. Welcome my sister, may you go in the Light.”

“And you Mother. I thank you.”

Siuan caught Arica as her legs collapsed beneath her. The Amyrlin helped her towards the door.

“Let’s get you into bed, child,” Siuan mumbled. “It’s been a long evening for both of us.”

As Arica drifted off to sleep, she marveled at the fact that for the first time in a very long time, she was at peace.

V – EPILOGUE

Arica put the note back onto the table in her sitting area and looked out the window at the majesty of Tar Valon. The sun was sinking low in the sky, casting a golden hue over the city. She savored the view, cementing the memory of it firmly in her mind before she departed early in the morning. Her pack was ready and a horse would be waiting at the stables for her at first bell.

She sat down on her small bed and took the note from the table again. It had arrived just yesterday and she had almost committed it to memory. Darius had written it to her, telling her that he would meet her in Junigan Village in three weeks time so she could bond him and they could return to the Tower for her first assignment.

It was hard to believe that she had been an *Aes Sedai* for six months now. That time had been spent under the watchful eye of Alene Sedai and the Green sitters, admittedly, but she was an *Aes Sedai*. She had made her dream a reality.

As soon as Alene had told her that she would be finished with her training and given some time to herself before being given a mission, Arica had petitioned to return to Junigan Village so she could let her Uncle Fairne know she was all right. She prayed that the fighting there had not taken his life yet – it would break her heart to know he had died without knowing that she was not in danger anymore.

Her first stop, however, was to her home village. She wanted to talk with Moria's mother again and let her know that things had turned out well and she had not forgotten her friend's memory, or her mother. She was sure she would have to face her own mother as well, but that was good, too. She could finally face the woman and tell her that she forgave her. What her mother's reaction would be was anyone's guess, but at least she could see her one last time.

Arica lay back on the bed and closed her eyes. She was just beginning to drift off to sleep when she heard a faint knock at her door. She spun her legs to the floor and called out to the late-night visitor.

“Come in,” she said.

The door opened wide enough to allow Nyra to creep into the room. She offered Arica a wistful smile and curtsied formally.

“Am I disturbing you, sister?” she asked meekly.

Arica waved the comment off in frustration.

“How many times do I have to tell you that just because I wear a shawl across my shoulders, it doesn’t mean I’m that much different from the Novice who used to play pranks with you?”

Nyra shrugged.

“I guess it’s just hard to get used to calling a full sister anything other than ‘sister’, Ari,” she said.

“Well, get used to it,” Arica responded with a smile. “Just because I swore the Three Oaths doesn’t mean I’ve changed that much.”

With a smile of her own, Nyra sat down on the bed beside Arica. She nodded towards the note.

“Is that from your Darius?” she asked with a wink.

Arica rolled her eyes and folded the parchment back up before placing it on the table again.

“Yes, it is,” she replied casually.

“I take it you’re going off to meet him?”

“No. I’m going to visit my family and let them know I’m okay. Then he is going to come meet me in my uncle’s village near the border of Andor and Arad Doman.”

Nyra nodded as a tear formed in her eyes.

“Then I guess I won’t see you for a while,” she said, her voice beginning to hitch with emotion. Arica wrapped her in a warm embrace.

“It’s not as if I’m leaving forever,” she said softly, stroking Nyra’s hair. “I’ll be back in a month or two. Besides, you’re going to be raised Accepted in the next few days. Once that happens you’ll be too busy to worry about anything else.”

The younger girl tightened her embrace and sighed.

“But I won’t have anyone to help me sort through what I see in those arches,” she said. “You won’t be here, and you’re the only one who cares about me here.”

Nyra broke down completely then, her weeping filling Arica’s heart to the point she thought it might break. She remembered all too well how she felt once she emerged from the three arches underneath the Tower, so she was pretty sure she knew how Nyra would feel as well.

“Look at it this way,” she said, trying to lighten the mood a bit. “At least you won’t have to deal with finding out that you were tied to one of the Forsaken.”

Arica got the laugh she was hoping for with that, so she pushed Nyra to arm’s length and looked her in the eyes.

“You are strong, Nyra,” she said. “You can make it through. When I get back, I’ll make sure we have some time together so you can tell me anything you want to about the

experience. Believe me, the memories will keep that long. Just remember that you will always be in my heart and mind, so you are never far from me.”

Nyra nodded and spent the next hour talking to Arica about her dreams and desires, just like she did when they were both Novices. After she left, Arica stretched out again with her hands crossed behind her head. She had come so far, yet she could not help thinking that she still had a long path to travel before she would see the end of it all.

She was still thinking about that when sleep took her for what was left of the night.

PART SEVEN

Full Circle

I – THERE’S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

Some things never change, Arica thought glumly as she rode into the small village she once called home. The buildings were a bit more run-down than she remembered them being, but the place looked much the same as it did when she left three years before. Music could be heard emanating from several inns, drifting across the evening breeze like a confused fog. It was obvious that a troop of some sort was here, the revelry of the night spilling into the streets, the meager buildings too small to contain the partiers.

She steered her bay mare around another unconscious form in the middle of the roadway, shaking her head as the memories of her past flooded in on her. It wasn't that long ago that she would have been in one of those inns, perched upon the knee of whatever soldier had taken an interest in her that night. Truth be told, it was a past she was glad to be rid of.

The inn that Mistress Luene owned was just around the next corner, but the crowd in front of it forced Arica to take a different route to get there. She frowned as she approached the stables. If the crowd was that large outside, the inn must be nearly full by now. She had planned to spend the two nights she was to be here at the inn, visiting her mother and Moria's mother but not imposing on either. Perhaps Mistress Luene would

remember her and give her a room anyway. The fact that she was now an *Aes Sedai* wouldn't hurt there, either.

Arica did not recognize the stable boy, but handed him a Tar Valon mark anyway. The young boy's eyes widened when he saw it and his jaw dropped open once he realized what the woman standing before him must be. He bowed quickly, reaching out for the horse's reigns as he did so. Arica handed them over with a tight smile, watching him retreat into the building with her mount before turning back to the inn.

She was almost to the doors when a very drunk man stepped in front of her. Arica halted and stared back at him, her patience beginning to edge towards its end rapidly.

"Hey, sweet thing," the man slurred. "How's 'bout a li'l you an' me, darlin'?"

Arica continued to stare at the man impassively.

"Move," she said coolly. "Or I will move you."

The man laughed a deep drunken chuckle.

"Ho ho!" he bellowed. "This kitten's got claws!"

With a faint nod, Arica embraced *saidar* and wove together flows of air. She reached out with the weave and lifted the man into the air before depositing him gently behind her. The crowd of people opened up, allowing her clear passage to the doors to the inn.

“Thank you,” she said, stepping forward, inwardly smiling at the hurried bows and muttered apologies.

The inn was the same as she remembered it. A young girl stood on the stage, her dress hiked up to show her thighs, well past the point of decency. Her singing voice left much to be desired, but the drunken soldiers could hardly care less about that. Their obscene jeers were easy enough to ignore. The fire in the hearth cast a warm glow through the room, making it just light enough to see but still dim enough that there was a modicum of privacy, even in the crowded common room.

Once her eyes adjusted to the lighting, Arica walked over to where a serving girl stood pouring mugs of ale and cups of brandy. The girl was new as well, so Arica knew there would be no chance of recognition there, either.

“Excuse me,” she said. “I am looking for Mistress Luene. Is she here?”

The serving girl looked up, her breath catching in her throat when she noticed the green-fringed shawl draped around the newcomer’s shoulders. The girl glanced down

quickly at Arica's hand, a startled squeak coming from her mouth as she saw the serpent ring that designated an *Aes Sedai*. The girl either had met one before, or knew her stories quite well because she immediately curtsied and made a hurried reply.

“Yes, *Aes Sedai*,” she said in a rush. “I shall fetch her for you.”

The girl turned and hurried into the kitchen, her skirts held to her knees as she ran. Arica stood patiently, trying hard to remember the lessons in composure that Alene Sedai had taught her before she left the Tower. She had never been patient before, and was quickly learning that this was one of the hardest parts about being an *Aes Sedai*.

Mistress Luene rushed in from the kitchen, her pace making it obvious that the serving girl had informed her as to the status of their new visitor. The large woman was just preparing to offer a curtsy herself when Arica smiled and spoke.

“Hello, Mistress Luene,” she said, just loud enough to be heard over the din in the room. “It's been a long time.”

The innkeeper stopped short.

“Arica,” she said, disbelief plainly heard in her voice. “Is that really you?”

With a smile, Arica nodded as the broad woman wrapped her in a crushing embrace, much to the shock of the serving girl. She struggled for breath as Mistress Luene hugged her.

“It is you!” the innkeeper exclaimed. “And an *Aes Sedai*, yet! I never would have believed it if I hadn’t seen it with my own two eyes!”

The woman pushed her back gently and held her at arm’s length.

“This is for real, isn’t it?” she asked. “Not just some new prank?”

“It’s for real,” Arica replied smiling. “I am now Arica Sedai, *Aes Sedai* of the Green Ajah.”

Mistress Luene shook her head in wonder.

“I’m proud of you, girl,” she said softly. “You went out and made something of yourself, even more than your uncle did.”

Arica fought the urge to blush.

“I don’t know about that,” she replied. “I’m just one of the newest sisters in the White Tower. Uncle Faire is captain of the guard in Junigan Village. He’s a little higher up the totem pole than me.”

“Your uncle’s biggest concern is breaking up drunks fighting in the street,” Luene snorted. “And you are in a position to make bloody kings dance. New to the name or not, *Aes Sedai* get a lot more respect than a captain of the guard.”

With a sigh, Arica nodded her agreement. Like it or not, there would be those who would bow down to her just because of what she was. There were also those who would want to kill her for the same reason, so at least there was a balance. She shook the thoughts off as she yawned. It had been a long ride, and all she wanted right now was to lie down and get a good night’s sleep.

“Is there any chance you have a room available?” she asked.

Luene smiled.

“Not wanting to face your mother just yet, are you?” came the innkeeper’s reply. “Can’t say as I blame you. It’s funny to see an *Aes Sedai* that is still afraid of her own mother, but since I switched your bottom not that long ago, I must be biased. There will always be a room for you here, Arica. Elveen will show you to it.”

The serving girl jumped slightly and started for the stairs. Arica began to follow, but a thought made her turn back to Mistress Luene.

“For all your talk of respecting *Aes Sedai*,” she said with a grin. “I notice you don’t give me that much.”

“Oh, I do respect you,” Luene replied, her eyes twinkling. “But my respect was earned when you took the switching the time that little Moria stole my clothes while you were with her. I didn’t question you on it then because you deserved that belt for sneaking a cup of brandy from me. There isn’t much that goes on here that I miss, Arica. Go get some sleep; the room is on me for as long as you need it.”

The woman’s laughter was still in her ears as Arica went up the stairs smiling.

Arica took a deep breath as she stood in front of the door to Moria’s home. She was sure Moria’s mother was here, but she had not yet prepared herself to see her again. She wanted to see her, true, but when she left the emotions had been running so high that she was mildly afraid the woman had decided to start blaming her for her daughter’s death.

Realizing that whatever happened was already woven into the pattern of the Wheel, she reached up and rapped her knuckles on the door softly. The sounds of

movement came from inside as she held her breath. This was it – there was no turning back now.

The door opened and Moria's mother looked out to see who had come to visit her. There were a few more lines on the woman's face, but she had changed little otherwise. The woman's eyes met Arica's and held her gaze for a heart-stopping moment before she reached out and buried her head in Arica's shoulder.

“You're alive,” the woman said, emotion filling her voice. “Thank the Light.”

Arica returned the hug, tears forming in her eyes. She had feared the worst, but the love she felt here was more than she had experienced in a very long time. The two made their way into the small home, still clinging to each other more than Arica felt she would when she visited her own mother later. After the initial tearful reunion, they sat down near the fire with cups of tea to catch up on old times.

Moria's mother told Arica about the village and how very little had changed. Arica's heart leapt when she learned that no one knew who had killed Lord Draven many years ago, and that the village council had ruled that the man probably got what he deserved due to his indiscretions with some of the younger girls there. It took a moment to sink in that she truly was free – no one was ever going to come after her for the murder she had committed three years gone. The relief was almost overwhelming.

Arica told the older woman about her travels; about Rytor and Darius, and about her learning she could channel. She told her about the terror she experience once she learned she had been taught by one of the Forsaken, and her visit with Cadsuane that led to her joining the White Tower. She confessed that she should not have been raised a full sister yet, but that it was the only way to be sure she was free of the Dark One's hold.

The two visited well into the afternoon, laughing at foolish things that had been done, and crying over the memory of a lost friend and daughter. After a meager meal that Arica was sure stretched the other woman's small budget, they said their goodbyes, promising to stay in touch more. Arica had one other stop to make today, and she wasn't sure she was ready for it.

As the door shut behind her, Arica sighed and began the walk to the house where she had grown up.

It was time to visit her mother.

She would not have believed it possible when she lived there, but Arica had to admit that the converted inn where she had grown up appeared even more dilapidated that it had when she left. Cracks covered the building's walls and several of the stairs leading upstairs were broken. She was beginning to wonder if her mother even still lived here.

Arica paused briefly at the door to her mother's rooms. Bracing herself for the worst, she knocked and waited for an answer. The door was opened by a man pulling the straps of his armor tight as he exited the room. He cast a curious look at Arica before rushing down the stairs. Arica watched after him for a moment before turning her attention back to the doorway.

"So you finally came back to beg forgiveness," came a voice from inside the room. "Too bad you won't get it here."

"Hello, Mother," Arica replied blandly as she entered the room and closed the door behind her. "It's been a long time."

The years had not been kind to the woman in the room, and Arica thought she could even make out the lines embedded in her face through the layers of powders and creams she used to hide them. There was still a hint of the beauty that Arica herself had inherited, but it was faded by the anger that sat behind her eyes in an almost permanent scowl. Not for the first time, Arica found herself thanking the Light she had not turned out the same way.

Taking care not to trip over the debris spread across the floor of the sparse room, Arica crossed to where her mother stood leaning against the wall, a thin robe held over her thin shift. Arica crossed her arms under her breasts as she regarded her mother with disdain.

“Wasn’t it a little early to be taking customers, Mother?” she asked sweetly. “Or was that a holdover from last night? Then again, you never really cared what time of day it was, did you? Or if your daughter needed you?”

With a grunt from the effort, Arica’s mother slapped her full across the face, knocking her backwards into a low table, causing it to topple. Arica kept her balance through sheer luck and put a hand to her cheek. This wasn’t supposed to happen. She was older now, free from the abuse this woman had dealt her for most of her life. She was an *Aes Sedai* – didn’t that mean something?

“That’s just like you,” her mother bellowed. “It’s all my fault. Where did you go, Arica? Off to see that bloody fool brother of mine? Did he fill your head with thoughts of self-importance? Somebody certainly did, for you to come back here dressed like some flaming Lady of the Land! Now get those clothes off and get to that inn and find some way to earn a little coin around here and I might leave most of the teeth in your bloody head.”

“Not this time, Mother,” Arica replied, a look of resigned determination filling her face. “I’m not your whipping post anymore. I’m smart enough to know that now that I’ve gotten out of this situation, I’m not willingly walking back into it.”

Her mother snorted as she walked over to another table and poured a cup of brandy from the bottle resting on it. She downed the cup quickly before pouring another and regarding her daughter again.

“Is that what you think?” she asked menacingly. “I am still your mother, child. If you need me to teach you your place again, I’ll gladly do it.”

“I can channel, Mother,” Arica replied coldly. “I’ve been to the White Tower. I’m an *Aes Sedai*.”

“Don’t lie to me child,” her mother replied, her eyes burning with anger. “I’ll strap the hide off you then turn you over to those witches for trying to impersonate one of them.”

With a sigh, Arica embraced *saidar*. This was not how she hoped the conversation would go, but now she found herself with no other alternatives. She wove together flows of air and lifted her mother into the air, her arms pinned at her sides.

“I can’t lie, Mother,” she said softly. “I swore oaths not to. I hoped to come back to find you had changed, and that maybe we could start over, but that was a hopeless dream. You never cared about me when I was here except how much money I could make you, and you don’t care now. This will be the last time we speak, I fear.”

Her mother struggled against the invisible bonds that held her, the anger switching to fear in her eyes. Arica sat her down gently and made her way back to the door before releasing the weave.

“I’m leaving now,” she said, emotion filling her voice. “You could try and stop me, but as you can see it would be pointless. Good bye, Mother.”

She walked out the door without looking back, never seeing the tears that began to flow from her mother’s eyes. She had made her choice, she had seen the truth, and now there was no other reason for her to remain here.

The walk back to the inn was one of the longest Arica had ever made. She nodded to Mistress Luene and went up to her rooms. After preparing her things for a morning journey, she lay down and drifted into a fitful sleep.

II – EXPLANATIONS

Where the village she was born and raised in had not changed at all, Arica was shocked at how much Junigan Village had. It could hardly be called a village any longer, for in the few years she had been gone it had grown to the size of a small city. It didn’t take her long to realize that most of the new buildings were barracks and defensive towers, either. The Taraboner raids had apparently worsened since the last time she had

been here. She prayed fervently that her Uncle Fairne was still alive so she could make things right with him before she returned to the Tower.

The guards at the Western Gate bowed as she rode towards them. She was reminded once again that this place was less sheltered than even some of the small villages near the Borderlands. Where most of the people in Arad Doman wouldn't have a clue about such things as *Aes Sedai* or Trollocs, the guards here recognized her for what she was from a ways off. Maybe that was just more of Fairne's instruction, or maybe it was the proximity to Andor and cities like Baerlon. Whatever the reason, she was sure there would be no problems for her here.

"Good day to you, *Aes Sedai*," one of the guards intoned as she approached.
"Welcome to Junigan."

The misspoken name caused Arica to raise an eyebrow.

"Don't you mean Junigan Village?" she asked. "That is the name I have always heard it referred to as."

The other guard chuckled slightly before catching himself.

“I’m sorry, *Aes Sedai*,” he said quickly. “I meant no disrespect. The village has grown beyond the confines of its original name, so the mayor and town council have dropped the ‘Village’ from the name.”

Arica nodded.

“It doesn’t look like the place I remember,” she said wistfully. “That much is certain.”

The first guard cocked his head to the side in a questioning manner.

“I take it you have been here before, m’lady?”

It was Arica’s turn to chuckle.

“My uncle lived here, and I am hoping he still does. I’m sure you would know of him. His name is Fairne Treamon.”

The first guard – whom Arica had realized was senior to the other – smiled broadly.

“Aye, madam. Captain Treamon does still live here, I am pleased to say,” the senior guard said. “We are privileged to serve under him.”

“Does he still have rooms near the barracks?”

“Yes, ma’am, he does. He is probably in the barracks proper at the moment, however. I would be honored to escort you to him, if you wish.”

Arica nodded and followed the senior guard through the gate. Her guess was not quite correct about what had caused the village to grow since she was last here, it turned out. While there were several new military buildings, there were also many more shops and a couple of new inns as well.

She found it slightly strange that the guard didn’t ask her about how Fairne’s niece came to be an *Aes Sedai*, or why he never mentioned it at least. She had learned on this trip that many people had no desire to learn anything about an *Aes Sedai*, and she was assuming that was the case here as well, but she didn’t know for sure. That unsure feeling was worrying her a bit, but she could not explain why if she had to.

After a short walk, they came to the entrance to the main barracks. It looked much the same at least, just with a shiny new coat of paint on it. The guard turned to her and offered a slight bow.

“Here we are, *Aes Sedai*,” he said. “If you will excuse me a moment, I will fetch Captain Treamon.”

She nodded as the man helped her dismount before he disappeared into the building. She stood looking around at the newfound majesty of this city that was once a small village between Bandar Eban and Baerlon. As she studied the new landscape, her thoughts drifted back to the last time she was here. She and Rytor were on their way to his home in Handor Village to tell his parents that they were to be wed.

Her heart sank a bit as she remembered the state of the village on her way back here this time. There was precious little left of it, an obvious casualty in the never-ending war with Tarabon over the disputed Almouth Plain. She had found no survivors there, and she felt sure that Rytor's parents were among the dead.

The sound of a throat being cleared snapped her out of her reverie. She turned slowly, recovering her composure as she did so, but faltering when she saw the face of the man behind her.

Fairne looked much older than his years, his once dark blonde hair now gone completely white. A black leather patch covered the place where his left eye should be, a jagged scar running across his face under it from his hairline to his cheek. Surprisingly, the scar and patch did not detract from his handsomely chiseled features, but rather added an element of dangerous mystery to the man. Even so, her breath caught in her throat at the sight of him.

“Uncle?” she asked breathlessly. “Is that you?”

“Thank the Light,” he replied, his voice filled with relief. “It really is you Ari!”

The man stepped forward and wrapped her in a massive embrace that she eagerly returned, tears slipping from her eyes at the welcoming response. It was good to know the man did not hate her for how she had left before. She was here in her uncle’s arms again, and for a moment it was as if the last few years had never even happened.

“I felt it was best for me to come and set things right with you, Uncle,” Arica said. “If I am to truly live up to my duties, certainly, but also because I missed you and regretted running out like that.”

The two were seated in Fairne’s apartments, sipping tea over the remains of an elaborate dinner. Arica’s uncle had spared no expense in welcoming his niece back to his home and life, despite her objections. As they ate, Arica had told Fairne about her adventures since she left. He laughed out loud when she told him about encountering Trollocs for the first time and looked on in concern as she detailed the circumstances of her teaching on how to channel.

She had learned that he lost his eye the night after she left, a discovery that did nothing to alleviate her feelings of guilt about that night. As it turned out, the raiding

party that came through the night she left was an advance whose purpose was to test the numbers. The next night the main force came through and laid the village to waste. Much as she had surmised, Rytor's parents fell to the second party. Fairne had escaped with only a handful of men and without his eye.

The man leaned back in his chair as Arica finished her own tale. He scratched his chin, idly fingering the tip of the scar in the process. He looked Arica deep in the eyes and sighed.

“There's something else I think you need to know,” he said as he leaned forward again. “First, I want you to know that I'm proud of you. I knew you left that night – I saw you go. I worried about you, and when I heard something about an *Aes Sedai* who claimed to be my niece at the door, I admit I thought they had it confused. I thought they meant there was an *Aes Sedai* with my niece. I had a hunch you could channel, so I feared they would find you and cause you harm. It does my heart good to see that you not only survived, you thrived. You have made a name for yourself, Arica, and I am proud to call you my blood. As for the other thing....”

A desperate knock at the door cut Fairne off before he could continue. He cast a frustrated glance at Arica, who nodded as he rose to answer the pounding.

“What is it?” he demanded as he slung the door open. “I asked to not be disturbed.”

The startled boy at the door held out a note with a trembling hand.

“The – the Lieutenant asked me to give this to you, Captain,” the boy stammered.

Fairne snatched the note from the outstretched hand and grunted irritably.

“Which Lieutenant, boy? I only have six of them!”

“I – I don’t know, sir,” the boy mumbled, swallowing hard. “All I know is that he just arrived back from Tear.”

A look of surprise crossed Fairne’s face as he nodded to the boy and gently shut the door on him. He tore open the sealed letter and scanned its contents. Arica narrowed her eyes as the blood drained from her uncle’s face.

“Blood and bloody ashes,” Fairne muttered. “Light help us all.”

“What is it, Uncle?” Arica asked as she rose from her seat, concern spreading across her features.

Fairne looked over at her and shook his head slowly.

“You’re an *Aes Sedai* now, so I guess you’ll hear this soon enough,” he replied, a tremble in his voice. “I guess its better that you hear it while you’re here with me.”

He held the letter out with a shaking hand. Arica took it and gave him one last look before opening it. She was more than a little nervous about reading something that seemed to terrify her uncle, but if it was that important, perhaps it was best she did know so she could alert the White Tower if need be. She scanned the few words quickly, feeling herself paling as she did so.

Captain Treamon,

The Stone of Tear has fallen. The impossible has come to pass. The banner of the Dragon flies above the Stone. Aiel have taken hold of Tear. The Dragon is Reborn. Please advise.

Arica looked up at Fairne with fear in her eyes.

“Can this be true?” she asked. “Are the prophesies truly being fulfilled?”

Fairne nodded as he sat down heavily in his seat.

“You were traveling, so the news must have missed you,” he replied with a sigh.

“There was a great battle on the coast of the Almouth Plain, in a small town called Falme.”

“I’ve heard of it,” she interjected. “What happened?”

“I wasn’t there, mind, nor did I have soldiers there, but it was incredible from what I hear. It seems someone found the legendary Horn of Valere, and blew it.”

Arica sucked in a breath involuntarily. She had heard stories of the Horn of Valere, of course, both as a child growing up, then more realistic ones while she was a novice in the Tower. It was said that a man would find the horn and sound it to summon the warriors of the Age of Legends to come and do battle at *Tarmon Gai’din*. Warriors like Birgitte Silverbow, whose arrows never missed their mark, and Artur Pendragon, also known as Artur Hawkwing, the man who had very nearly conquered the world. It was also said that once the horn was sounded, the Dragon Reborn would proclaim himself and break the world anew as he marched forth to fight the Dark One.

“Several reliable reports indicate that a battle took place in the skies above Falme as well,” Fairne continued. “Specifically, it is being said that the Dragon Reborn and the Dark One fought their first battle of this Age there, and the legends ran the invading army into the seas.”

Arica resumed her own seat, stunned into silence. Fairne was just beginning to rise when another knock came at the door.

“It’s open,” Fairne called out, giving up on the idea of rising.

A man dressed in the uniform of a Lieutenant in the guard entered and snapped a formal salute.

“I have returned from Tear and come to give you my report, Captain,” the man said as Fairne returned the salute half heartedly. “It seems that...”

The man broke off as he noticed Arica sitting with her eyes to the floor across from the senior officer. Fairne looked over at him and then turned quickly to Arica. She was just beginning to raise her head to hear the Lieutenant’s report when recognition and shock filled her eyes.

“Arica,” Fairne said softly. “I’m sure you remember my Lieutenant, even though he wasn’t one when you last saw him.”

Arica struggled to find her voice as vertigo swept in. Finally she managed to squeak out three words that seemed totally understated for the circumstances.

“You’re alive, Rytor!”

Darkness overtook her as she fell to the floor in a dead faint.

III – BACK FROM THE GRAVE

It was almost full dark when Arica awoke. She opened her eyes and looked around groggily, momentarily disoriented as she fought to remember where she was and what had happened.

“Finally decided to wake up, did you?” a man’s familiar voice asked from beside her.

Arica sat up and turned, blinking until her eyes focused on the face that had permeated her dreams for many years.

“Rytor,” she whispered. The man nodded.

“One and the same,” he replied, his voice betraying the jovial nature of his words as a mask. “I just stayed to make sure you were all right before resuming my duties. Some of us do that, you see.”

The man stood and started for the door, stopping only when Arica began to speak.

“I’m sorry I left you, Rytor,” she said. “I thought you were dead. I had no idea the healer was that good.”

“She wasn’t,” he replied simply without turning to face her. “From what I understand, you were the one who healed me.”

Arica opened her mouth to say how preposterous that idea was, but closed it with a snap without saying a word. She knew what she was and what she could do more than Rytor did, and the theory was not as far-fetched as she would normally believe. She had been taught that the ability to channel often manifested in times of greatest need, and the potential death of her one true love would certainly qualify.

“I didn’t know,” she finally replied as she dropped her eyes. “It was a long time after that before I found out that I could channel. Even longer before I learned how to heal. If I had known, I would have stayed.”

With a sigh, Rytor finally turned to face her again.

“Maybe you would have,” he said. “But it’s pointless to say that now. At least my parents went to their graves without knowing exactly what you had done.”

“Uncle Fairne told me about them,” Arica whispered. “I’m so sorry for your loss, Rytor.”

“Thanks,” he muttered. “It was so easy to handle losing them since I had just lost the woman who was to become my wife the night before.”

Arica bristled at the words and his tone. She was willing to allow that he was angry with her for the way she left him, but this had gone far enough.

“I believe we have established that you are hurt,” she said, her patience on edge. “But I think we should still be able to discuss it as adults.”

Rytor smirked.

“That *Aes Sedai* commanding presence doesn’t work so well on someone who shared your bed for as long as I did.”

Before either of them were fully aware of what was happening, Arica had crossed the room and slapped him full across the mouth. Rytor staggered backwards a step, his shocked eyes staring at the girl as his split lower lip began to trickle blood.

“You can say whatever you bloody well please about me,” Arica shouted at him. “But I draw the line at you throwing what we had back in my face like that! How dare you? Forget about what I am, you flaming oaf, think about who I am! I’m the woman you were planning to marry before I thought you ended up dead! I’m not some cheap harlot you had a couple of flings with!”

Rytor opened his mouth to respond, but Arica continued on without giving him a chance.

“What we had together may not mean anything to you now, but it still haunts my dreams! There has not been a night that has passed that I have not seen your face when I closed my eyes. Not a day goes by that I don’t remember what we had and long for what we were going to have. I didn’t leave you there because I wanted to, Rytor, I left because I could not bear to see you lost the way Moria was!”

As soon as she stopped to catch her breath, Arica realized she had literally backed the man into a corner as he retreated from her ferocious outburst. His arms began to come up and she quickly embraced *saidar* so she could defend herself. Then he did something she never would have expected.

He grabbed her shoulders, pulled her closer to him, and kissed her deeply and passionately.

Arica’s mind swam as her grip on the One Power faded like a whisper in the night air. Memories came flooding back to her; memories of nights the two of them had spent like this, and what came after the kissing. Memories of the two of them nestled in each other’s arms in the soft bed they shared, talking softly about their plans for the future. Before she could stop herself, she found herself responding to the kiss; wrapping her arms around him and running her fingers through his long hair.

Finally he broke the kiss and looked into her eyes, tears standing in his own. Her vision split as her own tears formed prisms that refracted her view of him. There was so much she wanted to say, so much she longed to tell him, but his words drove all those thoughts to the farthest corners of the universe.

“I still love you, Arica. I never stopped loving you.”

As the words penetrated her consciousness, Arica saw Rytor as he truly was. Gone was the shy young boy who had sworn on his honor to see her safely to this very place so many years before. In his place stood a man; a man who not only knew exactly what it was he was saying and what it meant, but who also now had the confidence and courage to say it, even through the stressful anger that had filled him only moments before. She found herself uncovering feelings she had buried so deeply that she had nearly forgotten they existed at all.

“I love you, too, Rytor,” she whispered. “I guess I never stopped loving you, either. They say there is an inscription on the Horn of Valere that reads ‘The grave is no bar to my call’. In this case, I believe it would be more appropriate if it said ‘The grave is no bar to my love for you’.”

Rytor smirked again, this time without the hard edge that had filled his face the last few times.

“So you’re saying that when the horn was sounded, you loved me again, even in death?”

Arica snickered in spite of herself as she pushed away from him.

“Not quite,” she replied. “Just a random thought.”

With a soft smile, she returned to the bed and sat down. Rytor joined her a moment later, a hint of nervousness in his eyes.

“So,” he began. “Now what? I would be more than happy if you would agree to marry me now as you were going to then.”

Arica smiled back and rested her hands on his.

“Nothing would make me happier,” she replied with a sigh, knowing that the next part would be hard for him to hear. “But I can’t. Not right now, at least.”

It was obvious to her that her words had struck him in a place no sword or dagger could ever touch. Her heart tore to see the anguish on his face, but she knew her decision was the right one. She hoped that deep down, he did as well.

“Is there someone else?” he asked, struggling to keep his emotions under control. “I know *Aes Sedai* probably don’t have time for such things, but I have to hear it from your lips.”

“There is,” she said softly, looking him directly in the eyes as she answered. “But if he were to ask, I would not marry him either. Would you like to know why?”

The man nodded reluctantly.

“I am an *Aes Sedai* of the Green Ajah,” she said with a sigh. “All I knew when I first got to the Tower was that the Green often bonded more than one man as their warder. Oh, I knew that they were also called the battle Ajah, and that they were preparing to fight in *Tarmon Gai’din* – the Last Battle, but that was a far-off thing; something that quite possibly would not come in my lifetime, anyway. The information that you brought back from Tear says otherwise. If the Dragon truly is Reborn, then *Tarmon Gai’din* is coming soon. The battle that will break the world again is closer now than it has ever been. I will fight in that battle, Rytor. I may very well die there. I have accepted that, even if I have not exactly come to terms with it. I could not marry any man with that knowledge over my head. Is that what you would want? For us to finally find each other after so long; for the two of us to get married and then for you to see me go to my death when that day comes?”

Rytor shook his head and continued staring at the floor.

“I don’t want that either,” Arica continued. “But I can offer you something. I need a warder. I have agreed to bond another man, but I will need all the help I can get if I am to battle the forces of the Dark One. I would like to bond you as well. You would be my first, just as I was once yours. You could go into that battle with me, fight at my side, and have the chance to keep me safe. If you died, I would soon follow, and you would do the same if I were to die first. I know that is not what you want, but it is all I can offer until that battle is won.”

For a long time, Rytor said nothing. Finally he nodded and dropped from the bed to his knees in front of it. He drew his sword with a flourish and held it out to her hilt-first, the tip pointed towards his heart.

“I swear my life to you, Arica Sedai,” he said formally. “My heart and my sword are yours to command. My life before yours, your way before mine. I shall go where you go and do as you command until the day we face down the Dark One and send him screaming back into his prison. I shall submit to be your warder, and shall hope to become more when you desire it.”

Arica smiled. After embracing *saidar*, she placed her hands on his head and channeled the weave she had been taught that would bond them together until death. As she tied off the weave, a small knot formed in her mind. Through that knot, she could feel the anxiousness and heartache flowing from the man kneeling at her feet. She could feel

his amazement as she appeared in his mind as well. The bond was complete; they truly were as one.

“Is – is that really what you’ve had to endure?” Rytor asked in shock, his eyes wide. “A Forsaken?”

Arica nodded as tears began to flow from her eyes.

“I’m so sorry I hurt you like this,” she said, sobbing. “I really never meant to hurt you so.”

“I know,” he replied through his own tears. “Light help me, but I know.”

The two spent the remainder of the night wrapped in each other’s arms, crying together, struggling to offer comfort that the other never even knew they needed.

IV – DARIUS

After three days, Arica had decided that having a little knot of emotions in the back of her head that told her everything Rytor was feeling was going to take a lot more getting used to. Every time something new came across their bond, she felt as if she were intruding on one of the most private and personal aspects of his life.

They had talked more after the bonding, and she felt they had finally managed to get past the circumstances of her departure. Truth be told, they had probably been more honest with each other than at any other time in their relationship. If not for the danger that loomed ahead, Arica thought she might even want to wed him now.

Well, except for the danger and Darius, of course.

She had been trying to decide what to tell him for the entire three days. She had asked Rytor for his advice, but the flash of anger and jealousy that came screaming across his warder bond had been more than enough to convince her that his opinion would not resolve anything. Now she found herself walking to the Northern Gate to meet him, and she was no closer to figuring out what to tell him than she was when she first rediscovered Rytor.

The guards bowed slightly as she approached and she acknowledged them with a brief nod of her head. They resumed their duties of watching people come in as she stood near the gateway. She idly watched the passersby as she thought about the situation she had put herself in.

She still cared very deeply for Darius – she could probably even go so far as to say she loved him. But she also loved Rytor. She knew the temporary solution was to distance herself from romantic relationships with both of them, but that would not work forever. Eventually the tension would cause an explosion, and that was something that

could be very costly. She shuddered to think what would happen if she were at *Tarmon Gai'din* facing down the forces of the Dark One when her two warders decided to start fighting themselves instead. Just the thought of it made her almost hope to die there.

Telling Darius that she had changed her mind about him was not really an option either. The two of them had been through too much together for her to just forget about him. He deserved so much better than that.

She bit back a sigh as she smiled at a farmer and his family as they passed by her. The two little girls in the back of the man's wagon smiled back and waved happily.

It would make her life so much easier if the two men could look at each other as merely partners in assuring her safety, but she knew men better than that. The moment the two laid eyes on each other, one would immediately view the other as competition for her affections.

"I probably shouldn't ask why an *Aes Sedai* is staring off into nothingness like that," came a familiar voice. "I doubt I would like the answer."

Arica looked up to see Darius dropping down from his mount's saddle, a broad grin on his face. With considerable effort, she forced herself to return it. She should have known that she could never hide the little things like that from him.

“I really won’t like this, will I?” he asked, the grin faltering.

“We need to talk, Darius,” she said as she wrapped herself in *Aes Sedai* serenity and calm. “Let’s go to my rooms.”

Thunderclouds had formed behind Darius’s eyes as he paced the room while she talked. When she finished, he turned to her and she wondered if he were as close to exploding from anger as he seemed.

“Let me see if I understand this correctly,” he said, his voice clearly revealing that he understood perfectly. “You came here to talk to your uncle and discovered that your old love was actually alive and well and living here working for him. The two of you talked, realized that you both still had feelings for each other, and so you bonded him as your warder instead of me. Is that fairly accurate?”

Arica could feel her annoyance at his posturing almost immediately.

“No,” she replied coldly. “That is not accurate. Yes, he and I did talk. Yes, we still have some feelings for each other – we were to be wed, after all. It’s only natural that we still care about one another under the circumstances. No, I did not bond him instead of you; I bonded him, yes, but I also intend to bond you, if you still desire it.”

Darius continued to stare at her for a long moment. She matched his gaze evenly, without dropping her own eyes a fraction. Finally, he turned away and strode to the window.

“I swore an oath to you long ago, Arica,” he said, his voice as hard as steel. “That has not changed. “I swore to be your warder, knowing better than you did at the time what that truly meant. If you still wish to bond me, I will submit to it, but you are going to have to make a choice between me and this other man. I will not share you in that way. That is where I will put my foot down, Light take your being an *Aes Sedai*. That is one area that you will not order what I will do.”

“I have no intention of ordering you to share me in that way,” Arica said as she rose from her seat, her own anger beginning to rise. “And as to making the choice, I have already done so. I choose neither of you.”

Darius spun from the window, eyes blazing, a furious retort on his lips until Arica hit him with the one thing she knew would grab his attention.

“The Dragon is reborn.”

The anger ran out of him much faster than it had arrived as he shut his mouth with an audible click. Concern replaced the thunderheads in his eyes.

“Are you certain?” he asked as he staggered to a chair and sat down heavily.

“Absolutely certain?”

“Rytor was in Tear until a week ago,” she told him calmly. “He witnessed Aiel attacking the Stone of Tear at night, and the banner of the Dragon flying above it the following morning. If that has happened, then it is safe to say that the Dragon holds Tear and has grasped the Sword That is Not a Sword.”

“What does that mean?”

“Inside the heart of the Stone of Tear resides a crystal sword called *Callandor*,” she explained with a sigh. “It was protected by many weaves, some made by women, others made by men before the male half of the One Power was tainted by the Dark One. In truth, *Callandor* is actually a very powerful *ter’angreal* – an artifact from the Age of Legends or before that possesses unknown abilities with the One Power. According to prophesy, only one man will be able to hold it and remove it from the weaves that protect it.”

“The Dragon,” he replied breathlessly. Arica nodded.

“See, I did pay attention during my studies. If those two prophecies – the fall of the Stone of Tear and a man wielding *Callandor* – have come to pass, then it is safe to assume that other prophecies have come to pass as well, and will be coming to pass very

soon. *Tarmon Gai'din* is upon us, and I will not go to face my possible death knowing that I may leave either you or Rytor a widower or myself a widow. If one of you died there, it would rip my soul enough. I will not have the other anguish on my heart as well.”

“*For he shall come like the breaking dawn,*” Darius muttered. “*And shatter the world again with his coming, and make it anew. May the Light save us from him.*”

Arica smiled.

“The Karaethon Cycle,” she replied. “I never knew you studied the Prophecies of the Dragon.”

“I did some reading while I was in Saldea,” he said without looking up. “I didn’t know that it was required studies in the White Tower either. I would think that most of the *Aes Sedai* would either despise it or fear it.”

With a shrug, Arica knelt down in front of him.

“It wasn’t required,” she said softly. “But after all the stuff that Rurhic told us, I thought it might be a good thing to know, being part of the ‘Battle Ajah’ and all. There was this one Brown sister in particular named Verin who was more than happy to help me study it.”

“That was my thinking as well,” he said, finally meeting her gaze. “Look, I respect your decision. I may not like it, but I do understand it and respect it. And if we all come back from the Last Battle alive, I will also respect whatever other decision you make. If you do happen to choose him, I won’t interfere.”

“Thank you,” Arica said. “That means a lot to me.”

The two continued to stare at each other for several more moments. At last Darius smiled and stood.

“So,” he asked. “What’s this bonding thing all about, anyway?”

Arica gave Fairne one last hug before allowing Darius to help her onto her horse. Rytor was off to one side, giving his replacement some final instructions before he left with her to whatever the Wheel of Time willed for their journeys.

Fairne had accepted Rytor’s departure with his normal fair-minded outlook. As he had told Arica, he could hardly be angry at the man leaving to protect his only niece at the Last Battle. In fact, he would be a fool to do anything other than offer them his blessings.

After casting one final look at the last member of her blood family that meant anything to her, Arica signaled her warders that it was time to leave. Rytor nodded to her with a smile and rode forwards to lead the way. Darius dropped back behind her to be the rear guard. Together, the three of them rode towards the Eastern Gate and Tar Valon beyond it.

As they rode, Arica smiled. It had been a long journey thus far, and there was no sign that it would be getting easier any time soon. The Dragon was Reborn and *Tarmon Gai'din* waited just over the horizon. But even with all the danger she knew she would be facing; even with all the pain that was to come, she was happy. She finally had a purpose and a family that loved her for who she was, not what she was or what she could offer them.

And in truth, she couldn't think of anything else that mattered.

EPILOGUE

Arica, Rytor, and Darius took their time returning to the White Tower, and arrived in time to witness a revolt in Tar Valon when the Amyrlin Seat, Siuan Sanche, was deposed and stilled. The Tower split, and Arica and her warders fled with the other rebels to Salidar. She remained with them, and now waits with them as they prepare to siege Tar Valon and place Egwene al'Vere as the rightful Amyrlin Seat.

Rurhic journeyed to Tear after leaving Arica at the White Tower and joined his fellow countrymen when the Dragon Reborn took the Stone of Tear. His mission was completed as he went with the Dragon to the Aiel Waste where he witnessed the man named *Car'a'carn* – the Chief of Chiefs and He Who Comes With the Dawn. He offered his honor to the Dragon Reborn and continues to follow him.

Ryle wandered from place to place until he learned that the Dragon Reborn had declared an amnesty for all men who could channel. He journeyed to what became known as the Black Tower on a small farm outside of Caemlyn where he underwent training from men appointed by the Dragon Reborn and became the male version of an *Aes Sedai* – *Asha'man*. The main difference (other than being male) between them was simple and obvious. *Aes Sedai* used the One Power to help and defend others – the *Asha'man* were trained to be weapons that would face the forces of the Dark One at the Last Battle.

Fairne continued to lead the soldiers under his command until the Whitecloaks came to Junigan Village. Fairne stood against them and died in battle defending his soldiers from the fanatics who labeled them Darkfriends and Dragonsworn.

Nyra continued her studies at the White Tower until the split occurred, when she joined Arica and the other rebels at Salidar. She anxiously awaits the time she too will be raised a full *Aes Sedai*.

To learn the circumstances surrounding the events mentioned here, and to learn the tale of Rand al'Thor – the Dragon Reborn, read *The Wheel of Time* by Robert Jordan.

Tarmon Gai'din still looms ahead as the world prepares for the Dragon Reborn to fulfill prophesy by facing the Dark One for the last time.

THE END, AND THE BEGINNING...

“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 the Prophecies of the Dragon,

the Karaethon Cycle

August 2002 – March 2004

LaVergne, Tennessee

AFTERWORD

For anyone who's curious, Arica Treamon d'Oronarico Sedai, *Aes Sedai* of the Green Ajah was my Wheel of Time Role-playing Game character once upon a time. For a few months in 2002, her life was my life – sort of. To the best of my knowledge, I am a man, not a young woman like Arica, and I certainly never had to deal with the things she did in her past, but for all intents and purposes, her decisions were mine and vice versa. Anyone who ever played a RPG will understand; to the rest of you, do the best you can with it.

Stephen King once said that the characters in his story have lives of their own, and he merely writes them down for them. He said he never knows what is going to happen to them until it happens. I can't say that, but I understand it greatly. As I write this introduction, three parts of the story have been written: Arica's experience with Lord Draven, her quest to find her father, and the day she and Rytor were to be married. I'm working on the prologue – the tale of her friendship with Moria, and the rest of the tale is unwritten. I know basically how it ends – I know Arica becomes *Aes Sedai*, and I know she will see Rytor again; I even know whether she and Rytor will live happily ever after as man and wife or if their lives will diverge once again. What I don't know yet is the path that she must take to get from point A to point Z. I don't know what happens between the time she leaves Rytor on his deathbed to the time she sees him again. But when I get to that point in the writing, I'll find out. When she decides how she will fill

those gaps, I'll write them down so we can all enjoy the story. To that end, she does have a life of her own.

This tale is based in part on the RPG adventure I played in during 2002. The timeline and some characters and events have changed, but the core of the story remains unchanged (how else would I know she became an *Aes Sedai*?). For anyone interested, when the game concluded she was a 5th level Wilder, 2nd level Initiate, and 3rd level *Aes Sedai*. If you understand that, wonderful. If not, it's not really that important.

Finally, some thanks.

Thanks to:

Angela Quick, my loving wife, who gave me some perspective into a woman's way of looking at things;

James Bagsby, for introducing me to the world of Wheel of Time, and for running the RPG that spawned this character. If not for his love of character background, this tale would never have been written;

Jim Patterson (Rhuric), for beta-reading this and reminding me of some of the basic rules of grammar and composition;

Steve Shimmell (Darius) and Todd Pilkenton (Ryle), who thrilled at hearing the exploits of the characters they played as Arica saw them;

And finally, thanks to Robert Jordan, for creating this world I've played around in for a bit.