

The Gathering Storm

Chapter One: Tears from Steel

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

The wind twisted around the magnificent Tower, brushing perfectly fitted stones and flapping majestic banners. The structure was somehow both graceful and powerful at the same time; a metaphor, perhaps, for those who had inhabited it for over three thousand years. Few looking upon the Tower would guess that at its heart, it had been both broken and corrupted. Separately.

The wind blew, passing through a city that seemed more a work of art than a workaday capital. Each building was a marvel; even the simple granite shopfronts had been crafted by meticulous Ogier hands to evoke wonder and beauty. Here a dome hinted at the form of a rising sun. There a fountain sprang from the top of a building itself, cresting what appeared to be two waves crashing together. On one cobbled street, a pair of steep three-story buildings stood opposite one another, each crafted into the form of a maiden. The marble creations—half-statue, half-dwelling—reached with stone hands toward one another as if in greeting, hair billowing behind, immobile, yet carved with such delicacy that every strand seemed to undulate in the wind's passing.

The streets themselves were far less grand. Oh, they had been laid out with care, radiating from the White Tower like streaks of sunlight. Yet that sunlight was dimmed by refuse and clutter, hints at the crowding the siege had caused. And perhaps the crowding wasn't the only reason for the disrepair. The storefront signs and awnings hadn't seen wash or polish in far too long. Rotting garbage piled where it had been dumped in alleys, drawing flies and rats but driving away all others. Dangerous toughs lounged on the street corners. Once, they'd never have dared do that, and certainly not with such arrogance.

Where was the White Tower, the law? Young fools laughed, saying that the city's troubles were the fault of the siege, and that things would settle down once the rebels were quelled. Older men shook their gray-streaked heads and muttered that things had never been this bad, even when the savage Aiel had besieged Tar Valon some twenty years previously.

Merchants ignored both young and old. They had their own problems, mainly on Southharbor, where trade into the city by way of the river had nearly come to a halt. Thick-chested workers toiled beneath the eyes of an Aes Sedai wearing a red-fringed shawl; she used the One Power to remove wards and weaken the stone, while the workmen broke the rock apart and hauled it away.

The workmen had sleeves rolled up, exposing curls of dark hair along burly arms, as they swung pick or hammer, pounding at the ancient stones. They dripped sweat onto rock or into the water below as they dug at the roots of the chain that blocked passage into the city by river. Half of that chain was now indestructible *cuendillar*, called heartstone by some. The effort to tear it free and allow passage into the city was an exhausting one; the harbor stoneworks—magnificent and strong, shaped by the Power itself—were only one of the more visible casualties of the silent war between the rebel Aes Sedai and those who held the Tower.

The wind blew through the harbor, where idling porters stood watching the workers chip the stones away, one by one, sending flakes of gray-white dust to float on the water. Those with too much sense—or perhaps too little—whispered that such portents could mean only one thing. Tarmon Gai'don, the Last Battle, must quickly be approaching.

The wind danced away from the docks, passing over the tall white bulwarks known as the Shining Walls. Here, at least, one could find clean lines and attention in the Tower Guard who stood watch, holding bows. Clean-shaven, wearing white tabards free from stain or wear, the archers watched over their barricades with the dangerous readiness of snakes prepared to strike. These soldiers had no intention of letting Tar Valon fall while they were on duty. Tar Valon had repelled every enemy. Trollocs had breached the walls, but been defeated in the city. Artur Hawkwing had failed to take Tar Valon. Even the black-veiled Aiel, who had ravaged the land during the Aiel War, had never taken the city. Many claimed this as a great victory. Others wondered what would have happened if the Aiel had actually *wanted* to cross into the city.

The wind passed over the western fork of the River Erinin, leaving the island of Tar Valon behind, passing the Alindaer Bridge soaring high to the right, as if taunting enemies to cross it and die. Past the bridge, the wind swept into Alindaer, one of the many villages near Tar Valon. It was a village mostly depopulated, as families had fled across the bridge for refuge in the city. The enemy army had appeared suddenly, without warning, as if brought by a blizzard. Few wondered at it. This rebel army was headed by Aes Sedai, and those who lived in the White Tower's shadow rarely gambled on just what Aes Sedai could and couldn't do.

The rebel army was poised, but uncertain. Over fifty thousand strong, it camped in a massive ring of tents around the smaller camp of Aes Sedai. There was a tight perimeter between the inner camp and the outer one, a perimeter that had most recently been intended to exclude men, particularly those who could wield *saidin*.

Almost, one could think that this camp of rebels intended to set up permanently. It had an air of common daily life about its workings. Figures in white bustled about, some wearing formal novice dresses, many others clothed in near approximations. Looking closely, one could see that many of these were far from young. Some had already reached their graying. But they were referred to as “children,” and obedient they were as they washed clothing, beat rugs, and scrubbed tents beneath the eyes of serene-faced Aes

Sedai. And if those Aes Sedai glanced with uncommon frequency at the nail-like profile of the White Tower, one would be mistaken in assuming them uncomfortable or nervous. Aes Sedai were in control. Always. Even now, when they had suffered an indelible defeat: Egwene al’Vere, the rebel Amyrlin Seat, had been captured and imprisoned within the Tower.

The wind flicked a few dresses, knocked some laundry from its hangings, then continued westward in a rush. Westward, past towering Dragonmount, with its shattered and smoking apex. Over the Black Hills and across the sweeping Caralain Grass. Here, pockets of sheltered snow clung to shadows beneath craggy overhangs or beside the occasional stands of mountain blackwood. It was time for spring to arrive, time for new shoots to peek through the winter’s thatch and for buds to sprout on the thin-branched willows. Few of either had actually come. The land was still dormant, as if waiting, holding its breath. The unnatural heat of the previous autumn had stretched well into winter, pressing upon the land a drought that had baked the life from all but the most vigorous plants. When winter had finally arrived, it had come in a tempest of ice and snow, a lingering, killing frost. Now that the cold had finally retreated, the scattered farmers looked in vain for hope.

The wind swept across brown winter grass, shaking the trees’ still-barren branches. To the west, as it approached the land known as Arad Doman—crested hills and short peaks—something suddenly slammed against it. Something unseen, something spawned by the distant darkness to the north. Something that flowed against the natural tide and currents of the air. The wind was consumed by it, blown southward in a gust, across low peaks and brown foothills to a log manor house, isolated, set upon the pine-forested hills in eastern Arad Doman. The wind blew across the manor house and the tents set up in the wide, open field before it, rattling pine needles and shaking tents.

Rand al’Thor, the Dragon Reborn, stood, hands behind his back as he looked out the open manor window. He still thought of them that way, his “hands,” though he now had only one. His left arm ended in a stump. He could feel the smooth, *saidar*-healed skin with the fingers of his good hand. Yet he felt as if his other hand should be there to touch.

Steel, he thought. I am steel. This cannot be fixed, and so I move on.

The building—a thick-logged structure of pine and cedar after a design favored by the Domani wealthy—groaned and settled in the wind. Something on that wind smelled of rotten meat. Not an uncommon scent, these days. Meat spoiled without warning, sometimes only a few minutes after butchering. Drying it or salting it didn’t help. It was the Dark One’s touch, and it grew with each passing day. How long until it was as overwhelming, as oily and nauseating, as the taint that had once coated *saidin*, the male half of the One Power?

The room he stood in was wide and long, thick logs making up the outer wall. Planks of pine—still smelling faintly of sap and stain—made up the other walls. The room was furnished sparsely: fur rug on the floor, a pair of aged crossed swords above the hearth,

furniture of wood with the bark left on in patches. The entire place had been decorated in a way to say that this was an idyllic home in the woods, away from the bustle of larger cities. Not a cabin, of course—it was far too large and lavish for that. A retreat.

“Rand?” a soft voice asked. He didn’t turn, but felt Min’s fingers touch his arm. A moment later, her hands moved to his waist and he felt her head rest upon his arm. He could feel her concern for him through the bond they shared.

Steel, he thought.

“I know you don’t like—” Min began.

“The boughs,” he said, nodding out the window. “You see those pines, just to the side of Bashere’s camp?”

“Yes, Rand. But—”

“They blow the wrong direction,” Rand said.

Min hesitated, and though she gave no physical reaction, the bond brought him her spike of alarm. Their window was on the upper floor of the manor, and outside of it, banners set above the camp flapped against themselves: the Banner of Light and the Dragon Banner for Rand, a much smaller blue flag bearing the three red kingspenny blossoms to mark the presence of House Bashere. All three flew proud . . . yet just to the side of them, the needles on the pines blew in the *opposite* direction.

“The Dark One stirs, Min,” Rand said. He could almost think these winds a result of his own *ta’veren* nature, but the events he caused were always possible. The wind blowing in two directions at once . . . well, he could feel the wrongness in the way those pines moved, even if he did have trouble distinguishing the individual needles. His eyesight hadn’t been the same since the attack on that day he’d lost his hand. It was as if . . . as if he looked through water at something distorted. It was getting better, slowly.

This building was one in a long line of manors, estates and other remote hiding places Rand had used during the last few weeks. He’d wanted to keep moving, jumping from location to location, following the failed meeting with Semirhage. He’d wanted time to think, to consider, and hopefully time to confuse the enemies that might be searching for him. Lord Algarin’s manor in Tear had been compromised; a pity. That had been a good place to stay. But Rand had to keep moving.

Below, Bashere’s Saldaeans had set up a camp on the manor’s green—the open patch of grass out front, bounded by rows of fir and pine trees. Calling it the “green” seemed an irony, these days. Even before the army’s arrival, it hadn’t been green—it had been a patchy brown, winter thatch broken only occasionally by hesitant new shoots. Those had been sickly and yellow, and they had now been trampled by hooves or booted feet.

Tents covered the green. From Rand's vantage on the second floor, the neat lines of small, peaked tents reminded him of squares on a stones board. The soldiers had noticed the wind. Some pointed, others kept their heads down, polishing armor, carrying buckets of water to the horse lines, sharpening swords or lance points. At least it was not the dead walking again. The most firm-hearted of men could lose their will when spirits rose from their graves, and Rand needed his army to be strong.

Need. No longer was it about what Rand wanted or what he wished. Everything he did focused only on need, and what he needed most was the lives of those who followed him. Soldiers to fight, and to die, to prepare the world for the Last Battle. Tarmon Gai'don was coming. What he *needed* was for them all to be strong enough to win.

To the far left of the green, running below the modest hill where the manor rested, a twisting stream cut the ground, sprouting with yellow stickfinger reeds and scrub oak that had yet to send out spring buds. A small waterway, to be certain, but a fine source of fresh water for the army.

Just outside the window, the winds suddenly righted themselves, and the flags whipped around, blowing in the other direction. So it hadn't been the needles after all, but the banners that had been in the wrong. Min let out a soft sigh, and he could feel her relief, though she still worried about him. That emotion was perpetual, lately. He felt it from all of them, each of the four bundles of emotions tucked away in the back of his mind. Three for the women he had allowed to place themselves there, one for the woman who had forced her way in against his will. One of them was drawing closer. Aviendha, coming with Rhuarc to meet with Rand at the manor house.

Each of the four women would regret their decision to bond him. He wished he could regret his decision to let them—or, at least, his decision to allow the three he loved. But the truth was that he needed Min, needed her strength and her love. He would use her as he used so many others. No, there was no place in him for regret. He just wished he could banish guilt as easily.

Ilyena! a voice said distantly in Rand's head. *My love. . . .* Lews Therin Telamon, Kinslayer, was relatively quiet this day. Rand tried not to think too hard about the things Semirhage had said on the day when Rand had lost his hand. She was one of the Forsaken; she would say anything if she thought it would bring her target pain.

She tortured an entire city to prove herself, Lews Therin whispered. *She has killed a thousand men a thousand different ways to see how their screams would differ from one another. But she rarely lies. Rarely.*

Rand pushed the voice away.

"Rand," Min said, softer than before.

He turned to look at her. She was lithe and slight of build, and he often felt that he towered over her. She kept her hair in short ringlets, the color dark—but not as dark as her deep, worried eyes. As always, she had chosen to wear a coat and trousers. Today, they were of a deep green, much like the needles on the pines outside. Yet, as if to contradict her tailored choice, she had had the outfit made to accentuate her figure. Silver embroidery in the shape of bonabell flowers ran around the cuffs, and lace peeked out from the sleeves beneath. She smelled faintly of lavender, perhaps from the soap she'd taken to most recently.

Why wear trousers only to trim herself up with lace? Rand had long abandoned trying to understand women. Understanding them would not help him reach Shayol Ghul. Besides, he didn't need to understand women in order to use them. Particularly if they had information he needed.

He gritted his teeth. *No, he thought. No, there are lines I will not cross. There are things even I will not do.*

"You're thinking about her again," Min said, almost accusatory.

He often wondered if there was such a thing as a bond that worked only one way. He would have given much for one of those.

"Rand, she's one of the Forsaken," Min continued. "She would have killed all of us without a second thought."

"She wasn't intending to kill me," Rand said softly, turning away from Min and looking out the window again. "Me she would have held."

Min cringed. Pain, worry. She was thinking of the twisted male *a'dam* that Semirhage had brought, hidden, when she'd come impersonating the Daughter of the Nine Moons. The Forsaken's disguise had been disrupted by Cadsuane's *ter'angreal*, allowing Rand to recognize Semirhage. Or, at least, allowing Lews Therin to recognize her.

The exchange had ended with Rand losing a hand but gaining one of the Forsaken as his prisoner. The last time he'd been in a similar situation, it hadn't ended well. He still didn't know where Asmodean had gone or why the weasel of a man had fled in the first place, but Rand did suspect that he had betrayed much about Rand's plans and activities.

Should have killed him. Should have killed them all.

Rand nodded, then froze. Had that been Lews Therin's thought or his own? Lews Therin, Rand thought. Are you there? He thought he heard laughter. Or perhaps it was sobbing.

Burn you! Rand thought. Talk to me! The time is coming. I need to know what you know! How did you seal the Dark One's prison? What went wrong, and why did it leave the prison flawed? Speak to me!

Yes, that was definitely sobbing, not laughter. Sometimes it was hard to tell with Lews Therin. Rand continued to think of the dead man as a separate individual from himself, regardless of what Semirhage had said. He had cleansed saidin! The taint was gone and it could touch his mind no longer. He was not going to go insane.

The descent into terminal madness can be . . . abrupt. He heard her words again, spoken for the others to hear. His secret was finally out. But Min had seen a viewing of Rand and another man melded together. Didn't that mean that he and Lews Therin were two separate people, two individuals forced into one body?

It makes no difference that his voice is real, Semirhage had said. *In fact, it makes his situation worse. . . .*

Rand watched a particular group of six soldiers inspect the horse lines that ran along the right side of the green, between the last line of tents and the line of trees. They checked the hooves one at a time.

Rand couldn't think about his madness. He also couldn't think about what Cadsuane was doing with Semirhage. That left only his plans. *The north and the east must be as one. The west and the south must be as one. The two must be as one.* That was the answer he'd received from the strange creatures beyond the red stone doorway. It was all he had to go on.

North and east. He had to force the lands into peace, whether they wanted it or not. He had a tenuous balance in the east, with Illian, Mayene, Cairhien and Tear all under his control in one way or another. The Seanchan ruled in the south, with Altara, Amadicia and Tarabon under their control. Murandy might soon be theirs, if they were pressing in that direction. That left Andor and Elayne.

Elayne. She was distant, far to the east, but he could still feel her bundle of emotions in his head. At such a distance, it was difficult to tell much, but he thought she was . . . relieved. Did that mean that her struggle for power in Andor was going well? What of the armies that had besieged her? And what *were* those Borderlanders up to? They had left their posts, joining together and marching south to find Rand, but giving no explanation of what they wanted of him. They were some of the best soldiers west of the Spine of the World. Their help would be invaluable at the Last Battle. But they had left the northlands. Why?

He was loath to confront them, however, for fear it could mean yet another fight. One he couldn't afford at the moment. Light! He would have thought that, of all people, he could have depended on the Border-landers to support him against the Shadow.

No matter, not for the moment. He had peace, or something close to it, in most of the land. He tried not to think about the recently placated rebellion against him in Tear or the volatility of the borders with Seanchan lands, or the plottings of the nobility in Cairhien.

Every time he thought he had a nation secure, it seemed a dozen others fell apart. How could he bring peace to a people who refused to accept it?

Min's fingers tightened on his arm, and he took a deep breath. He did what he could, and for now, he had two goals. Peace in Arad Doman and a truce with the Seanchan. The words he'd received beyond the doorway were now clear: He could not fight both the Seanchan and the Dark One. He had to keep the Seanchan from advancing until the Last Battle was over. After that, the Light could burn them all.

Why had the Seanchan ignored his requests for a meeting? Were they angered that he had captured Semirhage? He had let the *sul'dam* go free. Did that not speak of his good faith? Arad Doman would prove his intentions. If he could end the fight in Almoth Plain, he could show the Seanchan that he was serious in his suits for peace. He would *make* them see!

Rand took a deep breath, studying out the window. Bashere's eight thousand soldiers were erecting peaked tents and digging an earthen moat and wall around the green. The growing bulwark of deep brown contrasted with the white tents. Rand had ordered the Asha'man to help with the digging, and though he doubted they enjoyed the humble work, it did speed the process greatly. Besides, Rand suspected that they—like he himself—secretly savored any excuse to hold *saidin*. He could see a small group of them in their stiff black coats, weaves spinning around them as they dug up another patch of ground. There were ten of them in the camp, though only Flinn, Naeff and Narishma were full Asha'man.

The Saldaeans worked quickly, wearing their short coats as they cared for their mounts and set pickets. Others took shovelfuls of dirt from the Asha'man mound and used it to pack into the bulwark. Rand could see there was that displeasure on the faces of many of the hawk-nosed Saldaeans. They didn't like making camp in a wooded area, even one as sparsely flecked with pine as this hillside. Trees made cavalry charges difficult and could hide enemies as they approached.

Davram Bashere himself rode slowly through the camp, barking orders through that thick mustache of his. Beside him walked Lord Tellaen, a portly man in a long coat and wearing a thin Domani mustache. He was an acquaintance of Bashere's.

Lord Tellaen put himself at risk by housing Rand; sheltering the troops of the Dragon Reborn could be seen as treason. But who was there to punish him? Arad Doman was in chaos, the throne under threat from several rebel factions. And then there was the great Domani general Rodel Ituralde and his surprisingly effective war against the Seanchan to the south.

Like his men, Bashere went about unarmored in a short blue coat. He also wore a pair of the baggy trousers that he favored, the bottoms tucked into his knee-high boots. What did Bashere think of being caught in Rand's *ta'veren* web? In being, if not in direct opposition to the will of his queen, at least uncomfortably to the side of it? How long had

it been since he had reported to his rightful ruler? Hadn't he promised Rand that his queen's support would be speedy in coming? How many months ago had that been?

I am the Dragon Reborn, Rand thought. *I break all covenants and vows. Old allegiances are unimportant. Only Tarmon Gai'don matters.* Tarmon Gai'don, and the servants of the Shadow.

"I wonder if we'll find Graendal here," Rand said thoughtfully.

"Graendal?" Min asked. "What makes you think she might be?"

Rand shook his head. Asmodean had said Graendal was in Arad Doman, though that had been months ago. Was she still here? It seemed plausible; it was one of the few major nations where she could be. Graendal liked to have a hidden base of power far from where the other Forsaken lurked; she wouldn't have set up in Andor, Tear or Illian. Nor would she have been caught in the lands to the southwest, not with the Seanchan invasion.

She would have a hidden retreat somewhere. That was how she operated. Probably in the mountains, secluded, somewhere here in the north. He couldn't be sure she was in Arad Doman, though it felt *right* to him, from what he knew of her. From what Lews Therin knew of her.

But it was only a possibility. He would be careful, watching for her. Each of the Forsaken that he removed would make the Last Battle that much easier to fight. It would—

Soft footsteps approached his closed door.

Rand released Min and they both spun, Rand reaching for his sword—a useless gesture, now. The loss of his hand, though it wasn't his primary sword hand, would leave him vulnerable if he were to face a skilled opponent. Even with *saidin* to provide a far more potent weapon, his first instinct was for the sword. He'd have to change that. It might get him killed someday.

The door opened and Cadsuane strode in, as confident as any queen at court. She was a handsome woman, with dark eyes and an angular face. Her dark gray hair was up in a bun, a dozen tiny golden ornaments—each one a *ter'angreal* or *angreal*—hanging in their places atop it. Her dress was of a simple, thick wool, tied at the waist with a yellow belt, with more yellow embroidery across the collar. The dress itself was green, which was not uncommon, as that was her Ajah. Rand sometimes felt that her stern face—ageless, like that of any Aes Sedai who had worked long enough with the Power—would have fit better in the Red Ajah.

He relaxed his hand on his sword, though he did not release it. He fingered the cloth-tied hilt. The weapon was long, slightly curved, and the lacquered scabbard was painted with a long, sinuous dragon of red and gold. It looked as if it had been designed specifically

for Rand—and yet it was centuries old, unearthed only recently. *How odd, that they should find this now*, he thought, *and make a gift of it to me, completely unaware of what they were holding. . . .*

He had taken to wearing the sword immediately. It felt *right* beneath his fingers. He had told no one, not even Min, that he had recognized the weapon. And not, oddly, from Lews Therin's memories—but Rand's own.

Cadsuane was accompanied by several others. Nynaeve was expected; she often followed Cadsuane these days, like a rival cat she found encroaching on her territory. She did it for him, likely. The dark-haired Aes Sedai had never quite given up being Wisdom of Emond's Field, no matter what she said, and she gave no quarter to anyone she thought was abusing one under her protection. Unless, of course, Nynaeve herself was the one doing the abusing.

Today, she wore a dress of gray with a yellow sash at the waist over her belt—a new Domani fashion, he had heard—and had the customary red dot on her forehead. She wore a long gold necklace and slim gold belt, with matching bracelets and finger rings, both studded with large red, green and blue gems. The jewelry was a *ter'angreal*—or, rather, several of them and an *angreal* too—comparable to what Cadsuane wore. Rand had occasionally heard Nynaeve muttering that *her ter'angreal*, with the gaudy gems, were impossible to match to her clothing.

Where Nynaeve wasn't a surprise, Alivia was. Rand hadn't been aware that the former *damane* had been involved in the . . . information gathering. Still, she was supposed to be even stronger than Nynaeve in the One Power, so perhaps she had been brought for support. One could never be too careful where the Forsaken were concerned.

There were streaks of white in Alivia's hair, and she was just a bit taller than Nynaeve. That white in her hair was telling—any white or gray on a woman who wielded the One Power meant age. A great deal of it. Alivia claimed to be four centuries old. Today, the former *damane* wore a strikingly red dress, as if in an attempt to be confrontational. Most *damane*, once unleashed, remained timid. Not so with Alivia—there was an intensity to her that almost suggested a Whitecloak.

He felt Min stiffen, and he felt her displeasure. Alivia would help Rand die, eventually. That had been one of Min's viewings—and Min's viewings were never wrong. Except that she'd said she'd been wrong about Moiraine. Perhaps that meant that he wouldn't have to. . . .

No. Anything that made him think of living through the Last Battle, anything that made him hope, was dangerous. He had to be hard enough to accept what was coming to him. Hard enough to die when the time came.

You said we could die, Lews Therin said in the back of his mind. *You promised!*

Cadsuane said nothing as she walked across the room, helping herself to a cup of the spiced wine that sat on a small serving table beside the bed. Then she sat down in one of the red cedar chairs. At least she hadn't demanded that he pour the wine for her. That sort of thing wasn't beyond her.

"Well, what did you learn?" he asked, walking from the window and pouring himself a cup of wine as well. Min walked to the bed—with its frame of cedar logs and a skip-peeled headboard stained deeply reddish brown—and sat down, hands in her lap. She watched Alivia carefully.

Cadsuane raised an eyebrow at the sharpness in Rand's voice. He sighed, forcing down his annoyance. He had asked her to be his counselor, and he had agreed to her stipulations. Min said there was something important he would need to learn from Cadsuane—that was another viewing—and in truth, he had found her advice useful on more than one occasion. She was worth her constant demands for decorum.

"How did the questioning go, Cadsuane Sedai?" he asked in a more moderate tone.

She smiled to herself. "Well enough."

"Well enough?" Nynaeve snapped. She had made no promises to Cadsuane about civility. "That woman is infuriating!"

Cadsuane sipped her wine. "I wonder what else one could expect from one of the Forsaken, child. She has had a great deal of time to practice being . . . infuriating."

"Rand, that . . . creature is a *stone*," Nynaeve said, turning to him. "She's yielded barely a single useful sentence despite days of questioning! All she does is explain how inferior and backward we are, with the occasional aside that she's eventually going to kill us all." Nynaeve reached up to her long, single braid—but stopped herself short of tugging on it. She was getting better about that. Rand wondered why she bothered, considering how obvious her temper was.

"For all the girl's dramatic talk," Cadsuane said, nodding to Nynaeve, "she has a reasonable grasp on the situation. Phaw! When I said 'well enough' you were to interpret it as 'as well as you might expect, given our unfortunate constraints.' One cannot blindfold an artist, then be surprised when he has nothing to paint."

"This isn't art, Cadsuane," Rand said dryly. "It's torture." Min shared a glance with him, and he felt her concern. Concern for him? He wasn't the one being tortured.

The box, Lews Therin whispered. *We should have died in the box. Then . . . then it would be over.*

Cadsuane sipped her wine. Rand hadn't tasted his—he already knew that the spices were so strong as to render the drink unpalatable. Better that than the alternative.

“You press us for results, boy,” Cadsuane said. “And yet you deny us the tools we need to get them. Whether you name it torture, questioning, or *baking*, I call it foolishness. Now, if we were allowed to—”

“No!” Rand growled, waving a hand . . . a stump . . . at her. “You will not threaten or hurt her.”

Time spent in a dark box, being pulled forth and being beaten repeatedly. He would not have a woman in his power treated the same way. Not even one of the Forsaken. “You may question her, but some things I will not allow.”

Nynaeve sniffed. “Rand, she’s one of the *Forsaken*, dangerous beyond reason!”

“I am aware of the threat,” Rand said flatly, holding up the stump where his left hand had been. The metallic gold and red tattoo of a dragon’s body sparkled in the lamplight. Its head had been consumed in the Fire that had nearly killed him.

Nynaeve took a deep breath. “Yes, well, then you *must* see that normal rules shouldn’t apply to her!”

“I said no!” Rand said. “You will question her, but you will not hurt her!” *Not a woman. I will keep to this one shred of light inside me. I’ve caused the deaths and sorrows of too many women already.*

“If that is what you demand, boy,” Cadsuane said tersely, “then that is what shall be done. Just don’t whine when we are unable to drag out of her what she had for breakfast yesterday, let alone the locations of the other Forsaken. One begins to wonder why you insist we continue this farce at all. Perhaps we should simply turn her over to the White Tower and be done with it.”

Rand turned away. Outside, the soldiers had finished with the horse lines. They looked good. Even and straight, the animals given just the right amount of slack.

Turn her over to the White Tower? That would never happen. Cadsuane wouldn’t let Semirhage out of her grip until she got the answers she wanted. The wind still blew outside, his own banners flapping before his eyes.

“Turn her over to the White Tower, you say?” he said, glancing back into the room. “Which White Tower? Would you entrust her to Elaida? Or did you mean the others? I doubt that Egwene would be pleased if I dropped one of the Forsaken in her lap. Egwene might just let Semirhage go and take *me* captive instead. Force me to kneel before the White Tower’s justice and gentle me just to give her another notch in her belt.”

Nynaeve frowned. “Rand! Egwene would never—”

“She’s Amyrlin,” he said, downing his cup of wine in one gulp. It was as putrid as he recalled. “Aes Sedai to the core. I’m just another pawn to her.”

Yes, Lews Therin said. We need to stay away from all of them. They refused to help us, you know. Refused! Said my plan was too reckless. That left me with only the Hundred Companions, no women to form a circle. Traitors! This is their fault. But . . . but I’m the one who killed Ilyena. Why?

Nynaeve said something, but Rand ignored her. *Lews Therin?* he said to the voice. *What was it you did? The women wouldn’t help? Why?*

But Lews Therin had begun sobbing again, and his voice grew distant.

“Tell me!” Rand yelled, throwing his cup down. “Burn you, Kinslayer! Speak to me!”

The room fell silent.

Rand blinked. He’d never . . . never tried speaking to Lews Therin out loud where others could hear. And they knew. Semirhage had spoken of the voice that he heard, dismissing Rand as if he were a common madman.

Rand reached up, running a hand through his hair. Or he tried to . . . but he used the arm that was only a stump, and it accomplished nothing.

Light! he thought. *I’m losing control. Half the time, I don’t know which voice is mine and which is his. This was supposed to get better when I cleansed saidin! I was supposed to be safe. . . .*

Not safe, Lews Therin muttered. *We were already mad. Can’t turn back from that now.* He began to cackle, but the laughter turned to sobs.

Rand looked around the room. Min’s dark eyes were so worried he had to turn away. Alivia—who had watched the exchange about Semirhage with those penetrating eyes of hers—seemed too knowing. Nynaeve finally gave in and tugged on her braid. For once, Cadsuane didn’t chastise him for his outburst. Instead she just sipped her wine. How could she stand the stuff?

The thought was trivial. Ridiculous. He wanted to laugh. Only, the sound wouldn’t come out. He couldn’t summon even a wry humor, not anymore. *Light! I can’t keep this up. My eyes see as if in a fog, my hand is burned away, and the old wounds in my side rip open if I do anything more strenuous than breathe. I’m dry, like an overused well. I need to finish my work here and get to Shayol Ghul.*

Otherwise, there won’t be anything left of me for the Dark One to kill.

That wasn't a thought to cause laughter; it was one to cause despair. But Rand did not weep, for tears could not come from steel.

For the moment, Lews Therin's cries seemed enough for both of them.