

BRANDON SANDERSON

THE
WAY OF
KINGS

Book One of
THE STORMLIGHT ARCHIVE



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK • NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

THE WAY OF KINGS

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For Emily,
Who is too patient
Too kindly
And too wonderful
For words.
But I try anyway.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I finished the first draft of *The Way of Kings* in 2003, but I started working on pieces of the book back in the late '90s. Threads of this novel go back even further in my brain. No book of mine has spent longer simmering; I've spent more than a decade building this novel. And so it should be no surprise that a lot of people have helped me with it. It's going to be impossible to mention them all; my memory simply isn't that good. However, there are some major players that I would like to thank most deeply.

First comes my wife, Emily, to whom this book is dedicated. She gave greatly of herself to see the novel come to pass. That included not only reading and giving advice on the manuscript, but giving up her husband during long stretches of writing time. If you readers get a chance to meet her, some thanks might be in order. (She likes chocolate.)

As always, my excellent editor and agent—Moshe Feder and Joshua Bilmes—worked quite hard on this novel. Moshe, by special note, doesn't get paid more when his authors turn in 400k-word monstrosities. But he edited the novel without a word of complaint; his help was invaluable in turning it into the novel you now hold. He also got F. Paul Wilson to check over the medical scenes, to their great benefit.

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At Tor Books, Paul Stevens has been a huge help. He's been our in-house liaison for my books, and he's done an amazing job. Moshe and I are lucky to have his aid. Likewise, Irene Gallo—the art director—has been wonderfully helpful and patient in dealing with an intrusive author who wanted to do some crazy things with the artwork in his book. Many thanks to Irene, Justin Golenbock, Greg Collins, Karl Gold, Nathan Weaver, Heather Saunders, Meryl Gross, and the entire team at Tor Books. Dot Lin, who was my publicist up until this book's release (and who is now working to put a few extra letters after her name), was a wonderful help not just in giving me advice and a cheering section over in New York. Thank you all.

And speaking of artwork, you may notice that the interior art for this book is far more extensive than what you normally find in an epic fantasy. This is due to the extraordinary efforts of Greg Call, Isaac Stewart, and Ben McSweeney. They worked hard, drafting artwork numerous times to get things right. Ben's work on Shallan's sketchbook pages is simply beautiful, a melding of my best imaginings and his artistic interpretations. Isaac, who also did the interior artwork for the Mistborn novels, went far above and beyond what should reasonably have been expected of him. Late nights and demanding deadlines were the norm for this novel. He is to be commended. (The chapter icons, maps, colored endpages, and Navani notebook pages came from him, if you are wondering.)

As always, my writing group has been an amazing help. The members of it are joined by a few alpha and beta readers. In no particular order, these are: Karen Ahlstrom, Geoff and Rachel Biesinger, Ethan Skarstedt, Nathan Hatfield, Dan Wells, Kaylynn ZoBell, Alan and Jeanette Layton, Janci Olds, Kristina Kugler, Steve Diamond, Brian Delambre, Jason Denzel, Mi'chelle Trammel, Josh Walker, Chris King, Austin and Adam Hussey, Brian T. Hill, and that Ben guy whose name I can't spell right. I'm sure I'm forgetting some of you. You are all wonderful people, and I'd give you Shardblades if I could.

Whew. This is turning into an epic acknowledgments. But there are still a few more people that need notice. The writing of these words is happening right around the one year anniversary of me hiring the Inevitable Peter Ahlstrom as my personal assistant, editorial aid, and extra brain. If you go through previous acknowledgments pages, you'll always find him there. He's been a dear friend of mine, and an advocate of my work, for years. I'm lucky to now have him working for me full time. He got up at three a.m. today to get the last proofread of the book done. When you next see him at a convention, buy him a block of cheese.

I would also be remiss if I didn't thank Tom Doherty for letting me get away with writing this book. It's because of Tom's belief in this project that we were able to get away with the novel being so long, and a personal call from Tom was what managed to get Michael Whelan to do the cover. Tom has given me more here than I probably deserve; this novel (at the length it boasts, with the number of illustrations and artwork it contains) is the type that would make many publishers run away at full speed. This man is the reason Tor consistently releases such awesome books.

Finally, a moment on Michael Whelan's wonderful cover. For those who haven't heard the story, I started reading fantasy novels (indeed, I became a reader in the first place) back as a teenager because of a beautiful Michael Whelan cover painting. He has a unique ability to capture the true soul of a book in a painting—I always knew I could trust a novel with one of his covers. I've dreamed of someday having a painting of his on one of my books. It seemed something I was unlikely ever to receive.

To finally have it happen—and on the novel of my heart that I've been working on for so long—is an amazing honor.

CONTENTS

Prelude to the Stormlight Archive	15
Book One: The Way of Kings	19
Prologue: To Kill	21
Part One: Above Silence	35
Interludes	165
Part Two: The Illuminating Storms	181
Interludes	429
Part Three: Dying	453
Interludes	705
Part Four: Storm's Illumination	723
Part Five: The Silence Above	963
Epilogue: Of Most Worth	998
Endnote	1003
Ars Arcanum	1004

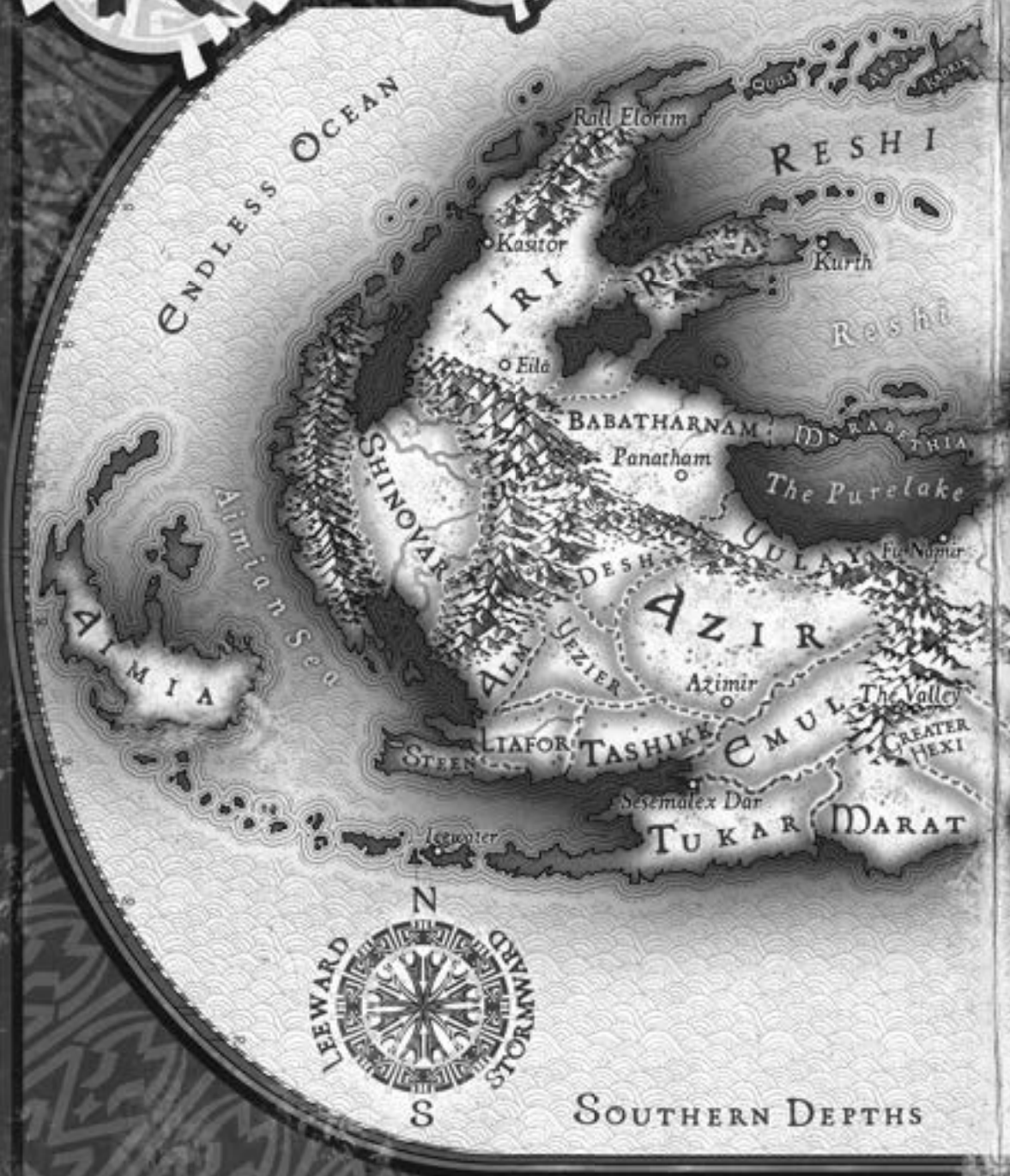
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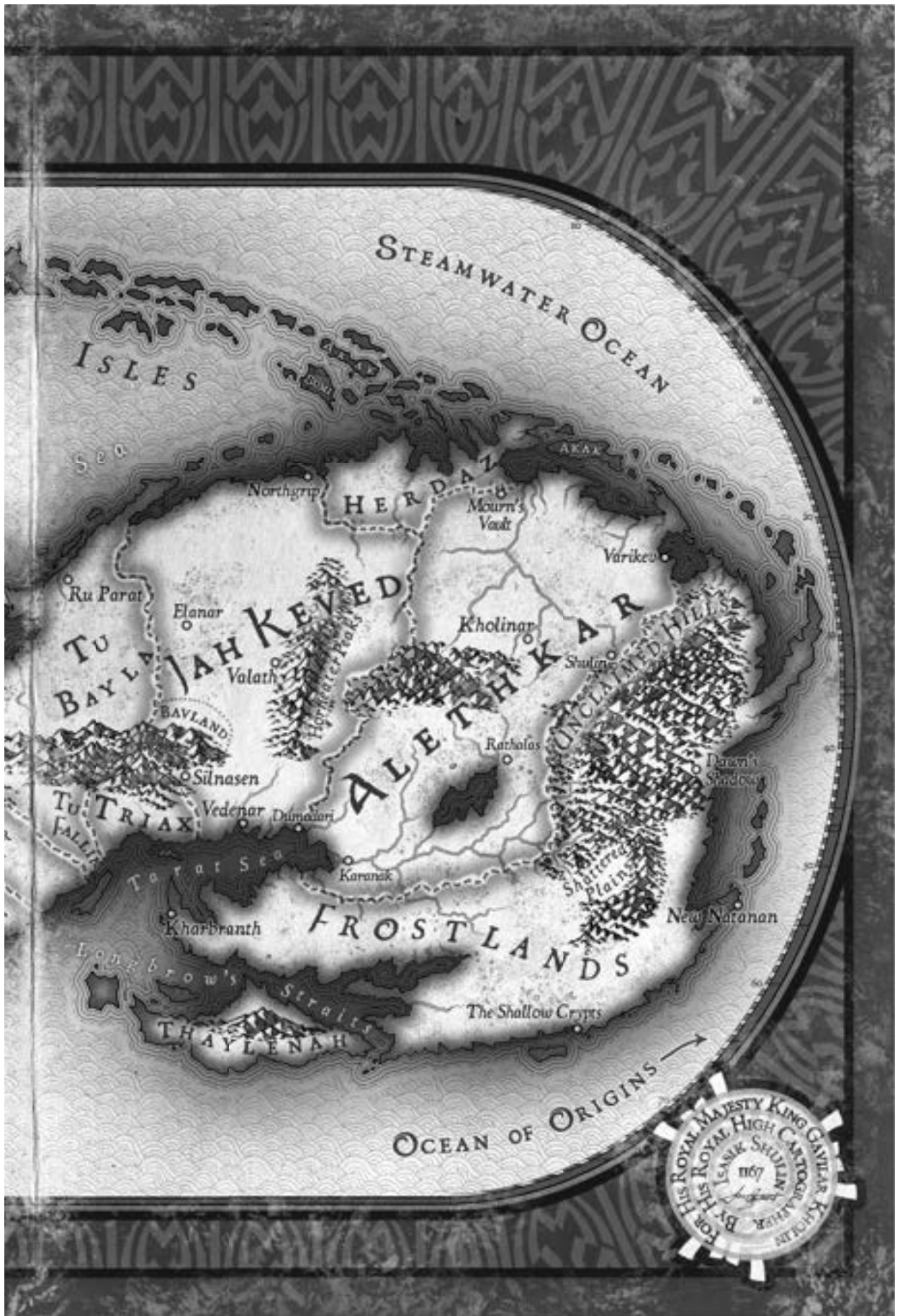
Map of Roshar	12-13
Map of the Unclaimed Hills and Alethkar	20
Shallan's Sketchbook: Skyeels	60
Map of the Lumberyard	94
Shallan's Sketchbook: Chulls	144

Prime Map of the Shattered Plains	182
The Alethi Codes of War	244
Map of the Warcamps	274
Historical Greatshell Picture	350
Map of Kharbranth	454
Map of Four Cities, from Kabsal's Evidence	498
Shallan's Sketchbook: Shalebark	538
Shallan's Sketchbook: Axehounds	580
The History of Man	614
Shallan's Sketchbook: Rockbuds	686
Navani's Notebook: One	762
Shallan's Sketchbook: Plants	788
Navani's Notebook: Two	856
Detail of the Tower Plateau	892
Relief of Nalan'Elin	944

THE
WAY OF
KINGS

Roshar







PRELUDE TO
THE STORMLIGHT ARCHIVE

Kalak rounded a rocky stone ridge and stumbled to a stop before the body of a dying thunderclast. The enormous stone beast lay on its side, riblike protrusions from its chest broken and cracked. The monstrosity was vaguely skeletal in shape, with unnaturally long limbs that sprouted from granite shoulders. The eyes were deep red spots on the arrowhead face, as if created by a fire burning deep within the stone. They faded.

Even after all these centuries, seeing a thunderclast up close made Kalak shiver. The beast's hand was as long as a man was tall. He'd been killed by hands like those before, and it hadn't been pleasant.

Of course, dying rarely was.

He rounded the creature, picking his way more carefully across the battlefield. The plain was a place of misshapen rock and stone, natural pillars rising around him, bodies littering the ground. Few plants lived here.

The stone ridges and mounds bore numerous scars. Some were shattered, blasted-out sections where Surgebinders had fought. Less frequently, he passed cracked, oddly shaped hollows where thunderclasts had ripped themselves free of the stone to join the fray.

Many of the bodies around him were human; many were not. Blood mixed. Red. Orange. Violet. Though none of the bodies around him stirred, an indistinct haze of sounds hung in the air. Moans of pain, cries of grief. They did not seem like the sounds of victory. Smoke curled from the occasional patches of growth or heaps of burning corpses. Even some sections of rock smoldered. The Dustbringers had done their work well.

But I survived, Kalak thought, hand to breast as he hastened to the meeting place. *I actually survived this time.*

That was dangerous. When he died, he was sent back, no choice. When he survived the Desolation, he was supposed to go back as well. Back to that place that he dreaded. Back to that place of pain and fire. What if he just decided . . . not to go?

Perilous thoughts, perhaps traitorous thoughts. He hastened on his way.

The place of meeting was in the shadow of a large rock formation, a spire rising into the sky. As always, the ten of them had decided upon it before the battle. The survivors would make their way here. Oddly, only one of the others was waiting for him. Jezrien. Had the other eight all

died? It was possible. The battle had been so furious this time, one of the worst. The enemy was growing increasingly tenacious.

But no. Kalak frowned as he stepped up to the base of the spire. Seven magnificent swords stood proudly here, driven point-first into the stone ground. Each was a masterly work of art, flowing in design, inscribed with glyphs and patterns. He recognized each one. If their masters had died, the Blades would have vanished.

These Blades were weapons of power beyond even Shardblades. These were unique. Precious. Jezrien stood outside the ring of swords, looking eastward.

“Jezrien?”

The figure in white and blue glanced toward him. Even after all these centuries, Jezrien looked young, like a man barely into his thirtieth year. His short black beard was neatly trimmed, though his once-fine clothing was scorched and stained with blood. He folded his arms behind his back as he turned to Kalak.

“What is this, Jezrien?” Kalak asked. “Where are the others?”

“Departed.” Jezrien’s voice was calm, deep, regal. Though he hadn’t worn a crown in centuries, his royal manner lingered. He always seemed to know what to do. “You might call it a miracle. Only one of us died this time.”

“Talenel,” Kalak said. His was the only Blade unaccounted for.

“Yes. He died holding that passage by the northern waterway.”

Kalak nodded. Taln had a tendency to choose seemingly hopeless fights and win them. He also had a tendency to die in the process. He would be back now, in the place where they went between Desolations. The place of nightmares.

Kalak found himself shaking. When had he become so weak? “Jezrien, I can’t return this time.” Kalak whispered the words, stepping up and gripping the other man’s arm. “I *can’t*.”

Kalak felt something within him break at the admission. How long had it been? Centuries, perhaps millennia, of torture. It was so hard to keep track. Those fires, those hooks, digging into his flesh anew each day. Searing the skin off his arm, then burning the fat, then driving to the bone. He could smell it. Almighty, he could *smell* it!

“Leave your sword,” Jezrien said.

“What?”

Jezrien nodded to the ring of weapons. “I was chosen to wait for you. We weren’t certain if you had survived. A . . . a decision has been made. It is time for the Oathpact to end.”

Kalak felt a sharp stab of horror. “What will that do?”

“Ishar believes that so long as there is one of us still bound to the Oath-

pact, it may be enough. There is a chance we might end the cycle of Desolations.”

Kalak looked into the immortal king’s eyes. Black smoke rose from a small patch to their left. Groans of the dying haunted them from behind. There, in Jezrien’s eyes, Kalak saw anguish and grief. Perhaps even cowardice. This was a man hanging from a cliff by a thread.

Almighty above, Kalak thought. *You’re broken too, aren’t you?* They all were.

Kalak turned and walked to the side, where a low ridge overlooked part of the battlefield.

There were so many corpses, and among them walked the living. Men in primitive wraps, carrying spears topped by bronze heads. Juxtaposed between them were others in gleaming plate armor. One group walked past, four men in their ragged tanned skins or shoddy leather joining a powerful figure in beautiful silver plate, amazingly intricate. Such a contrast.

Jezrien stepped up beside him.

“They see us as divinities,” Kalak whispered. “They rely upon us, Jezrien. We’re all that they have.”

“They have the Radiants. That will be enough.”

Kalak shook his head. “He will not remain bound by this. The enemy. He will find a way around it. You know he will.”

“Perhaps.” The king of Heralds offered no further explanation.

“And Tahn?” Kalak asked. *The flesh burning. The fires. The pain over and over and over . . .*

“Better that one man should suffer than ten,” Jezrien whispered. He seemed so cold. Like a shadow caused by heat and light falling on someone honorable and true, casting this black imitation behind.

Jezrien walked back to the ring of swords. His own Blade formed in his hands, appearing from mist, wet with condensation. “It has been decided, Kalak. We will go our ways, and we will not seek out one another. Our Blades must be left. The Oathpact ends now.” He lifted his sword and rammed it into the stone with the other seven.

Jezrien hesitated, looking at the sword, then bowed his head and turned away. As if ashamed. “We chose this burden willingly. Well, we can choose to drop it if we wish.”

“What do we tell the people, Jezrien?” Kalak asked. “What will they say of this day?”

“It’s simple,” Jezrien said, walking away. “We tell them that they finally won. It’s an easy enough lie. Who knows? Maybe it will turn out to be true.”

Kalak watched Jezrien depart across the burned landscape. Finally, he

summoned his own Blade and slammed it into the stone beside the other eight. He turned and walked in the direction opposite from Jezrien.

And yet, he could not help glancing back at the ring of swords and the single open spot. The place where the tenth sword should have gone.

The one of them who was lost. The one they had abandoned.

Forgive us, Kalak thought, then left.

BOOK
ONE

THE WAY OF KINGS

4,500 Years Later



Map of Alethkar and surroundings, created by His Majesty Gavilar Kholin's royal surveyors, circa 1167.



“The love of men is a frigid thing, a mountain stream only three steps from the ice. We are his. Oh Stormfather . . . we are his. It is but a thousand days, and the Everstorm comes.”

—Collected on the first day of the week Palah of the month Shash of the year 1171, thirty-one seconds before death. Subject was a darkeyed pregnant woman of middle years. The child did not survive.

Szeth-son-son-Vallano, Truthless of Shinovar, wore white on the day he was to kill a king. The white clothing was a Parshendi tradition, foreign to him. But he did as his masters required and did not ask for an explanation.

He sat in a large stone room, baked by enormous firepits that cast a garish light upon the revelers, causing beads of sweat to form on their skin as they danced, and drank, and yelled, and sang, and clapped. Some fell to the ground red-faced, the revelry too much for them, their stomachs proving to be inferior wineskins. They looked as if they were dead, at least until their friends carried them out of the feast hall to waiting beds.

Szeth did not sway to the drums, drink the sapphire wine, or stand to dance. He sat on a bench at the back, a still servant in white robes. Few at the treaty-signing celebration noticed him. He was just a servant, and Shin were easy to ignore. Most out here in the East thought Szeth’s kind were docile and harmless. They were generally right.

The drummers began a new rhythm. The beats shook Szeth like a quartet of thumping hearts, pumping waves of invisible blood through the room.

Szeth's masters—who were dismissed as savages by those in more civilized kingdoms—sat at their own tables. They were men with skin of black marbled with red. Parshendi, they were named—cousins to the more docile servant peoples known as parshmen in most of the world. An oddity. They did not call themselves Parshendi; this was the Alethi name for them. It meant, roughly, “parshmen who can think.” Neither side seemed to see that as an insult.

The Parshendi had brought the musicians. At first, the Alethi lighteyes had been hesitant. To them, drums were base instruments of the common, darkeyed people. But wine was the great assassin of both tradition and propriety, and now the Alethi elite danced with abandon.

Szeth stood and began to pick his way through the room. The revelry had lasted long; even the king had retired hours ago. But many still celebrated. As he walked, Szeth was forced to step around Dalinar Kholin—the king's own brother—who slumped drunken at a small table. The aging but powerfully built man kept waving away those who tried to encourage him to bed. Where was Jasnah, the king's daughter? Elhokar, the king's son and heir, sat at the high table, ruling the feast in his father's absence. He was in conversation with two men, a dark-skinned Azish man who had an odd patch of pale skin on his cheek and a thinner, Alethi-looking man who kept glancing over his shoulder.

The heir's feasting companions were unimportant. Szeth stayed far from the heir, skirting the sides of the room, passing the drummers. Musicspren zipped through the air around them, the tiny spirits taking the form of spinning translucent ribbons. As Szeth passed the drummers, they noted him. They would withdraw soon, along with all of the other Parshendi.

They did not seem offended. They did not seem angry. And yet they were going to break their treaty of only a few hours. It made no sense. But Szeth did not ask questions.

At the edge of the room, he passed rows of unwavering azure lights that bulged out where wall met floor. They held sapphires infused with Stormlight. Profane. How could the men of these lands use something so sacred for mere illumination? Worse, the Alethi scholars were said to be close to creating new Shardblades. Szeth hoped that was just wishful boasting. For if it *did* happen, the world would be changed. Likely in a way that ended with people in all countries—from distant Thaylenah to towering Jah Keved—speaking Alethi to their children.

They were a grand people, these Alethi. Even drunk, there was a natural nobility to them. Tall and well made, the men dressed in dark silk coats that buttoned down the sides of the chest and were elaborately embroidered in silver or gold. Each one looked a general on the field.

22 The women were even more splendid. They wore grand silk dresses,

tightly fitted, the bright colors a contrast to the dark tones favored by the men. The left sleeve of each dress was longer than the right one, covering the hand. Alethi had an odd sense of propriety.

Their pure black hair was pinned up atop their heads, either in intricate weavings of braids or in loose piles. It was often woven with gold ribbons or ornaments, along with gems that glowed with Stormlight. Beautiful. Profane, but beautiful.

Szeth left the feasting chamber behind. Just outside, he passed the doorway into the Beggars' Feast. It was an Alethi tradition, a room where some of the poorest men and women in the city were given a feast complementing that of the king and his guests. A man with a long grey and black beard slumped in the doorway, smiling foolishly—though whether from wine or a weak mind, Szeth could not tell.

"Have you seen me?" the man asked with slurred speech. He laughed, then began to speak in gibberish, reaching for a wineskin. So it was drink after all. Szeth brushed by, continuing past a line of statues depicting the Ten Heralds from ancient Vorin theology. Jezerezeh, Ishi, Kelek, Talenelat. He counted off each one, and realized there were only nine here. One was conspicuously missing. Why had Shalash's statue been removed? King Gavilar was said to be very devout in his Vorin worship. Too devout, by some people's standards.

The hallway here curved to the right, running around the perimeter of the domed palace. They were on the king's floor, two levels up, surrounded by rock walls, ceiling, and floor. That was profane. Stone was not to be trod upon. But what was he to do? He was Truthless. He did as his masters demanded.

Today, that included wearing white. Loose white trousers tied at the waist with a rope, and over them a filmy shirt with long sleeves, open at the front. White clothing for a killer was a tradition among the Parshendi. Although Szeth had not asked, his masters had explained why.

White to be bold. White to not blend into the night. White to give warning.

For if you were going to assassinate a man, he was entitled to see you coming.

Szeth turned right, taking the hallway directly toward the king's chambers. Torches burned on the walls, their light unsatisfying to him, a meal of thin broth after a long fast. Flamespren danced around them, like large insects made solely of congealed light. The torches were useless to him. He reached for his pouch and the spheres it contained, but then hesitated when he saw more of the blue lights ahead: a pair of Stormlight lamps hanging on the wall, brilliant sapphires glowing at their hearts. Szeth walked up to one of these, holding out his hand to cup it around the glass-shrouded gemstone.

“You there!” a voice called in Alethi. There were two guards at the intersection. Double guard, for there were savages abroad in Kholinar this night. True, those savages were supposed to be allies now. But alliances could be shallow things indeed.

This one wouldn’t last the hour.

Szeth looked as the two guards approached. They carried spears; they weren’t lighteyes, and were therefore forbidden the sword. Their painted blue breastplates were ornate, however, as were their helms. They might be darkeyed, but they were high-ranking citizens with honored positions in the royal guard.

Stopping a few feet away, the guard at the front gestured with his spear. “Go on, now. This is no place for you.” He had tan Alethi skin and a thin mustache that ran all the way around his mouth, becoming a beard at the bottom.

Szeth didn’t move.

“Well?” the guard said. “What are you waiting for?”

Szeth breathed in deeply, drawing forth the Stormlight. It streamed into him, siphoned from the twin sapphire lamps on the walls, sucked in as if by his deep inhalation. The Stormlight raged inside of him, and the hallway suddenly grew darker, falling into shade like a hilltop cut off from the sun by a transient cloud.

Szeth could feel the Light’s warmth, its fury, like a tempest that had been injected directly into his veins. The power of it was invigorating but dangerous. It pushed him to act. To move. To strike.

Holding his breath, he clung to the Stormlight. He could still feel it leaking out. Stormlight could be held for only a short time, a few minutes at most. It leaked away, the human body too porous a container. He had heard that the Voidbringers could hold it in perfectly. But, then, did they even exist? His punishment declared that they didn’t. His honor demanded that they did.

Afire with holy energy, Szeth turned to the guards. They could see that he was leaking Stormlight, wisps of it curling from his skin like luminescent smoke. The lead guard squinted, frowning. Szeth was sure the man had never seen anything like it before. As far as he knew, Szeth had killed every stonewalker who had ever seen what he could do.

“What . . . what are you?” The guard’s voice had lost its certainty. “Spirit or man?”

“What am I?” Szeth whispered, a bit of Light leaking from his lips as he looked past the man down the long hallway. “I’m . . . sorry.”

Szeth blinked, Lashing himself to that distant point down the hallway. Stormlight raged from him in a flash, chilling his skin, and the ground immediately stopped pulling him downward. Instead, he was pulled toward

that distant point—it was as if, to him, that direction had suddenly become *down*.

This was a Basic Lashing, first of his three kinds of Lashings. It gave him the ability to manipulate whatever force, spren, or god it was that held men to the ground. With this Lashing, he could bind people or objects to different surfaces or in different directions.

From Szeth's perspective, the hallway was now a deep shaft down which he was falling, and the two guards stood on one of the sides. They were shocked when Szeth's feet hit them, one for each face, throwing them over. Szeth shifted his view and Lashed himself to the floor. Light leaked from him. The floor of the hallway again became *down*, and he landed between the two guards, clothes crackling and dropping flakes of frost. He rose, beginning the process of summoning his Shardblade.

One of the guards fumbled for his spear. Szeth reached down, touching the soldier's shoulder while looking up. He focused on a point above him while willing the Light out of his body and into the guard, Lashing the poor man to the ceiling.

The guard yelped in shock as *up* became *down* for him. Light trailing from his form, he crashed into the ceiling and dropped his spear. It was not Lashed directly, and clattered back down to the floor near Szeth.

To kill. It was the greatest of sins. And yet here Szeth stood, Truthless, profanely walking on stones used for building. And it would not end. As Truthless, there was only one life he was forbidden to take.

And that was his own.

At the tenth beat of his heart, his Shardblade dropped into his waiting hand. It formed as if condensing from mist, water beading along the metal length. His Shardblade was long and thin, edged on both sides, smaller than most others. Szeth swept it out, carving a line in the stone floor and passing through the second guard's neck.

As always, the Shardblade killed oddly; though it cut easily through stone, steel, or anything inanimate, the metal fuzzed when it touched living skin. It traveled through the guard's neck without leaving a mark, but once it did, the man's eyes smoked and burned. They blackened, shriveling up in his head, and he slumped forward, dead. A Shardblade did not cut living flesh; it severed the soul itself.

Above, the first guard gasped. He'd managed to get to his feet, even though they were planted on the ceiling of the hallway. "Shardbearer!" he shouted. "A Shardbearer assaults the king's hall! To arms!"

Finally, Szeth thought. Szeth's use of Stormlight was unfamiliar to the guards, but they knew a Shardblade when they saw one.

Szeth bent down and picked up the spear that had fallen from above. As he did so, he released the breath he'd been holding since drawing in the

Stormlight. It sustained him while he held it, but those two lanterns hadn't contained much of it, so he would need to breathe again soon. The Light began to leak away more quickly, now that he wasn't holding his breath.

Szeth set the spear's butt against the stone floor, then looked upward. The guard above stopped shouting, eyes opening wide as the tails of his shirt began to slip downward, the earth below reasserting its dominance. The Light steaming off his body dwindled.

He looked down at Szeth. Down at the spear tip pointing directly at his heart. Violet fearspren crawled out of the stone ceiling around him.

The Light ran out. The guard fell.

He screamed as he hit, the spear impaling him through the chest. Szeth let the spear fall away, carried to the ground with a muffled thump by the body twitching on its end. Shardblade in hand, he turned down a side corridor, following the map he'd memorized. He ducked around a corner and flattened himself against the wall just as a troop of guards reached the dead men. The newcomers began shouting immediately, continuing the alarm.

His instructions were clear. Kill the king, but be seen doing it. Let the Alethi know he was coming and what he was doing. Why? Why did the Parshendi agree to this treaty, only to send an assassin the very night of its signing?

More gemstones glowed on the walls of the hallway here. King Gavilar liked lavish display, and he couldn't know that he was leaving sources of power for Szeth to use in his Lashings. The things Szeth did hadn't been seen for millennia. Histories from those times were all but nonexistent, and the legends were horribly inaccurate.

Szeth peeked back out into the corridor. One of the guards at the intersection saw him, pointing and yelling. Szeth made sure they got a good look, then ducked away. He took a deep breath as he ran, drawing in Stormlight from the lanterns. His body came alive with it, and his speed increased, his muscles bursting with energy. Light became a storm inside of him; his blood thundered in his ears. It was terrible and wonderful at the same time.

Two corridors down, one to the side. He threw open the door of a storage room, then hesitated a moment—just long enough for a guard to round the corner and see him—before dashing into the room. Preparing for a Full Lashing, he raised his arm and commanded the Stormlight to pool there, causing the skin to burst alight with radiance. Then he flung his hand out toward the doorframe, spraying white luminescence across it like paint. He slammed the door just as the guards arrived.

The Stormlight held the door in the frame with the strength of a hundred arms. A Full Lashing bound objects together, holding them fast until the Stormlight ran out. It took longer to create—and drained Stormlight far more quickly—than a Basic Lashing. The door handle shook, and then

the wood began to crack as the guards threw their weight against it, one man calling for an axe.

Szeth crossed the room in rapid strides, weaving around the shrouded furniture that had been stored here. It was of red cloth and deep expensive woods. He reached the far wall and—preparing himself for yet another blasphemy—he raised his Shardblade and slashed horizontally through the dark grey stone. The rock sliced easily; a Shardblade could cut any inanimate object. Two vertical slashes followed, then one across the bottom, cutting a large square block. He pressed his hand against it, willing Stormlight into the stone.

Behind him the room's door began to crack. He looked over his shoulder and focused on the shaking door, Lashing the block in that direction. Frost crystallized on his clothing—Lashing something so large required a great deal of Stormlight. The tempest within him stilled, like a storm reduced to a drizzle.

He stepped aside. The large stone block shuddered, sliding into the room. Normally, moving the block would have been impossible. Its own weight would have held it against the stones below. Yet now, that same weight pulled it free; for the block, the direction of the room's door was *down*. With a deep grinding sound, the block slid free of the wall and tumbled through the air, smashing furniture.

The soldiers finally broke through the door, staggering into the room just as the enormous block crashed into them.

Szeth turned his back on the terrible sound of the screams, the splintering of wood, the breaking of bones. He ducked and stepped through his new hole, entering the hallway outside.

He walked slowly, drawing Stormlight from the lamps he passed, siphoning it to him and stoking anew the tempest within. As the lamps dimmed, the corridor darkened. A thick wooden door stood at the end, and as he approached, small fearspren—shaped like globs of purple goo—began to wriggle from the masonry, pointing toward the doorway. They were drawn by the terror being felt on the other side.

Szeth pushed the door open, entering the last corridor leading to the king's chambers. Tall, red ceramic vases lined the pathway, and they were interspersed with nervous soldiers. They flanked a long, narrow rug. It was red, like a river of blood.

The spearmen in front didn't wait for him to get close. They broke into a trot, lifting their short throwing spears. Szeth slammed his hand to the side, pushing Stormlight into the doorframe, using the third and final type of Lashing, a Reverse Lashing. This one worked differently from the other two. It did not make the doorframe emit Stormlight; indeed, it seemed to pull nearby light *into* it, giving it a strange penumbra.

The spearmen threw, and Szeth stood still, hand on the doorframe. A Reverse Lashing required his constant touch, but took comparatively little Stormlight. During one, anything that approached him—particularly lighter objects—was instead pulled toward the Lashing itself.

The spears veered in the air, splitting around him and slamming into the wooden frame. As he felt them hit, Szeth leaped into the air and Lashed himself to the right wall, his feet hitting the stone with a slap.

He immediately reoriented his perspective. To his eyes, he wasn't standing on the wall, the soldiers were, the blood-red carpet streaming between them like a long tapestry. Szeth bolted down the hallway, striking with his Shardblade, shearing through the necks of two men who had thrown spears at him. Their eyes burned, and they collapsed.

The other guards in the hallway began to panic. Some tried to attack him, others yelled for more help, still others cringed away from him. The attackers had trouble—they were disoriented by the oddity of striking at someone who hung on the wall. Szeth cut down a few, then flipped into the air, tucking into a roll, and Lashed himself back to the floor.

He hit the ground in the midst of the soldiers. Completely surrounded, but holding a Shardblade.

According to legend, the Shardblades were first carried by the Knights Radiant uncounted ages ago. Gifts of their god, granted to allow them to fight horrors of rock and flame, dozens of feet tall, foes whose eyes burned with hatred. The Voidbringers. When your foe had skin as hard as stone itself, steel was useless. Something supernal was required.

Szeth rose from his crouch, loose white clothes rippling, jaw clenched against his sins. He struck out, his weapon flashing with reflected torchlight. Elegant, wide swings. Three of them, one after another. He could neither close his ears to the screams that followed nor avoid seeing the men fall. They dropped round him like toys knocked over by a child's careless kick. If the Blade touched a man's spine, he died, eyes burning. If it cut through the core of a limb, it killed that limb. One soldier stumbled away from Szeth, arm flopping uselessly on his shoulder. He would never be able to feel it or use it again.

Szeth lowered his Shardblade, standing among the cinder-eyed corpses. Here, in Alethkar, men often spoke of the legends—of mankind's hard-won victory over the Voidbringers. But when weapons created to fight nightmares were turned against common soldiers, the lives of men became cheap things indeed.

Szeth turned and continued on his way, slippered feet falling on the soft red rug. The Shardblade, as always, glistened silver and clean. When one killed with a Blade, there was no blood. That seemed like a sign. The Shardblade was just a tool; it could not be blamed for the murders.

The door at the end of the hallway burst open. Szeth froze as a small group of soldiers rushed out, ushering a man in regal robes, his head ducked as if to avoid arrows. The soldiers wore deep blue, the color of the King's Guard, and the corpses didn't make them stop and gawk. They were prepared for what a Shardbearer could do. They opened a side door and shoved their ward through, several leveling spears at Szeth as they backed out.

Another figure stepped from the king's quarters; he wore glistening blue armor made of smoothly interlocking plates. Unlike common plate armor, however, this armor had no leather or mail visible at the joints—just smaller plates, fitting together with intricate precision. The armor was beautiful, the blue inlaid with golden bands around the edges of each piece of plate, the helm ornamented with three waves of small, hornlike wings.

Shardplate, the customary complement to a Shardblade. The newcomer carried a sword as well, an enormous Shardblade six feet long with a design along the blade like burning flames, a weapon of silvery metal that gleamed and almost seemed to glow. A weapon designed to slay dark gods, a larger counterpart to the one Szeth carried.

Szeth hesitated. He didn't recognize the armor; he had not been warned that he would be set at this task, and hadn't been given proper time to memorize the various suits of Plate or Blades owned by the Alethi. But a Shardbearer would have to be dealt with before he chased the king; he could not leave such a foe behind.

Besides, perhaps a Shardbearer could defeat him, kill him and end his miserable life. His Lashings wouldn't work directly on someone in Shardplate, and the armor would enhance the man, strengthen him. Szeth's honor would not allow him to betray his mission or seek death. But if that death occurred, he *would* welcome it.

The Shardbearer struck, and Szeth Lashed himself to the side of the hallway, leaping with a twist and landing on the wall. He danced backward, Blade held at the ready. The Shardbearer fell into an aggressive posture, using one of the swordplay stances favored here in the East. He moved far more nimbly than one would expect for a man in such bulky armor. Shardplate was special, as ancient and magical as the Blades it complemented.

The Shardbearer struck. Szeth skipped to the side and Lashed himself to the ceiling as the Shardbearer's Blade sliced into the wall. Feeling a thrill at the contest, Szeth dashed forward and attacked downward with an overhand blow, trying to hit the Shardbearer's helm. The man ducked, going down on one knee, letting Szeth's Blade cleave empty air.

Szeth leaped backward as the Shardbearer swung upward with his Blade, slicing into the ceiling. Szeth didn't own a set of Plate himself, and didn't care to. His Lashings interfered with the gemstones that powered Shardplate, and he had to choose one or the other.

As the Shardbearer turned, Szeth sprinted forward across the ceiling. As expected, the Shardbearer swung again, and Szeth leaped to the side, rolling. He came up from his roll and flipped, Lashing himself to the floor again. He spun to land on the ground behind the Shardbearer. He slammed his Blade into his opponent's open back.

Unfortunately, there was one major advantage Plate offered: It could block a Shardblade. Szeth's weapon hit solidly, causing a web of glowing lines to spread out across the back of the armor, and Stormlight began to leak free from them. Shardplate didn't dent or bend like common metal. Szeth would have to hit the Shardbearer in the same location at least once more to break through.

Szeth danced out of range as the Shardbearer swung in anger, trying to cut at Szeth's knees. The tempest within Szeth gave him many advantages—including the ability to quickly recover from small wounds. But it would not restore limbs killed by a Shardblade.

He rounded the Shardbearer, then picked a moment and dashed forward. The Shardbearer swung again, but Szeth briefly Lashed himself to the ceiling for lift. He shot into the air, cresting over the swing, then immediately Lashed himself back to the floor. He struck as he landed, but the Shardbearer recovered quickly and executed a perfect follow-through stroke, coming within a finger of hitting Szeth.

The man was dangerously skilled with that Blade. Many Shardbearers depended too much on the power of their weapon and armor. This man was different.

Szeth jumped to the wall and struck at the Shardbearer with quick, terse attacks, like a snapping eel. The Shardbearer fended him off with wide, sweeping counters. His Blade's length kept Szeth at bay.

This is taking too long! Szeth thought. If the king slipped away into hiding, Szeth would fail in his mission no matter how many people he killed. He ducked in for another strike, but the Shardbearer forced him back. Each second this fight lasted was another for the king's escape.

It was time to be reckless. Szeth launched into the air, Lashing himself to the other end of the hallway and falling feet-first toward his adversary. The Shardbearer didn't hesitate to swing, but Szeth Lashed himself down at an angle, dropping immediately. The Shardblade swished through the air above him.

He landed in a crouch, using his momentum to throw himself forward, and swung at the Shardbearer's side, where the Plate had cracked. He hit with a powerful blow. That piece of the Plate shattered, bits of molten metal streaking away. The Shardbearer grunted, dropping to one knee, raising a hand to his side. Szeth raised a foot to the man's side and shoved him backward with a Stormlight-enhanced kick.

The heavy Shardbearer crashed into the door of the king's quarters, smashing it and falling partway into the room beyond. Szeth left him, ducking instead through the doorway to the right, following the way the king had gone. The hallway here had the same red carpet, and Stormlight lamps on the walls gave Szeth a chance to recharge the tempest within.

Energy blazed within him again, and he sped up. If he could get far enough ahead, he could deal with the king, then turn back to fight off the Shardbearer. It wouldn't be easy. A Full Lashing on a doorway wouldn't stop a Shardbearer, and that Plate would let the man run supernaturally fast. Szeth glanced over his shoulder.

The Shardbearer wasn't following. The man sat up in his armor, looking dazed. Szeth could just barely see him, sitting in the doorway, surrounded by broken bits of wood. Perhaps Szeth had wounded him more than he'd thought.

Or maybe . . .

Szeth froze. He thought of the ducked head of the man who'd been rushed out, face obscured. The Shardbearer *still* wasn't following. He was so skilled. It was said that few men could rival Gavilar Kholin's swordsmanship. Could it be?

Szeth turned and dashed back, trusting his instincts. As soon as the Shardbearer saw him, he climbed to his feet with alacrity. Szeth ran faster. What was the safest place for your king? In the hands of some guards, fleeing? Or protected in a suit of Shardplate, left behind, dismissed as a bodyguard?

Clever, Szeth thought as the formerly sluggish Shardbearer fell into another battle stance. Szeth attacked with renewed vigor, swinging his Blade in a flurry of strikes. The Shardbearer—the king—aggressively struck out with broad, sweeping blows. Szeth pulled away from one of these, feeling the wind of the weapon passing just inches before him. He timed his next move, then dashed forward, ducking underneath the king's follow-through.

The king, expecting another strike at his side, twisted with his arm held protectively to block the hole in his Plate. That gave Szeth the room to run past him and into the king's chambers.

The king spun around to follow, but Szeth ran through the lavishly furnished chamber, flinging out his hand, touching pieces of furniture he passed. He infused them with Stormlight, Lashing them to a point behind the king. The furniture tumbled as if the room had been turned on its side, couches, chairs, and tables dropping toward the surprised king. Gavilar made the mistake of chopping at them with his Shardblade. The weapon easily sheared through a large couch, but the pieces still crashed into him, making him stumble. A footstool hit him next, throwing him to the ground.

Gavilar rolled out of the way of the furniture and charged forward, Plate leaking streams of Light from the cracked sections. Szeth gathered himself, then leaped into the air, Lashing himself backward and to the right as the king arrived. He zipped out of the way of the king's blow, then Lashed himself forward with two Basic Lashings in a row. Stormlight flashed out of him, clothing freezing, as he was pulled toward the king at twice the speed of a normal fall.

The king's posture indicated surprise as Szeth lurched in midair, then spun toward him, swinging. He slammed his Blade into the king's helm, then immediately Lashed himself to the ceiling and fell upward, slamming into the stone roof above. He'd Lashed himself in too many directions too quickly, and his body had lost track, making it difficult to land gracefully. He stumbled back to his feet.

Below, the king stepped back, trying to get into position to swing up at Szeth. The man's helm was cracked, leaking Stormlight, and he stood protectively, defending the side with the broken plate. The king used a one-handed swing, reaching for the ceiling. Szeth immediately Lashed himself downward, judging that the king's attack would leave him unable to get his sword back in time.

Szeth underestimated his opponent. The king stepped into Szeth's attack, trusting his helm to absorb the blow. Just as Szeth hit the helm a second time—shattering it—Gavilar punched with his off hand, slamming his gauntleted fist into Szeth's face.

Blinding light flashed in Szeth's eyes, a counterpoint to the sudden agony that crashed across his face. Everything blurred, his vision fading.

Pain. So much *pain!*

He screamed, Stormlight leaving him in a rush, and he slammed back into something hard. The balcony doors. More pain broke out across his shoulders, as if someone had stabbed him with a hundred daggers, and he hit the ground and rolled to a stop, muscles trembling. The blow would have killed an ordinary man.

No time for pain. No time for pain. No time for pain!

He blinked, shaking his head, the world blurry and dark. Was he blind? No. It was dark outside. He was on the wooden balcony; the force of the blow had thrown him through the doors. Something was thumping. Heavy footfalls. The Shardbearer!

Szeth stumbled to his feet, vision swimming. Blood streamed from the side of his face, and Stormlight rose from his skin, blinding his left eye. The Light. It would heal him, if it could. His jaw felt unhinged. Broken? He'd dropped his Shardblade.

A lumbering shadow moved in front of him; the Shardbearer's armor

had leaked enough Stormlight that the king was having trouble walking. But he was coming.

Szeth screamed, kneeling, infusing Stormlight into the wooden balcony, Lashing it downward. The air frosted around him. The tempest roared, traveling down his arms into the wood. He Lashed it downward, then did it again. He Lashed a fourth time as Gavilar stepped onto the balcony. It lurched under the extra weight. The wood cracked, straining.

The Shardbearer hesitated.

Szeth Lashed the balcony downward a fifth time. The balcony supports shattered and the entire structure broke free from the building. Szeth screamed through a broken jaw and used his final bit of Stormlight to Lash himself to the side of the building. He fell to the side, passing the shocked Shardbearer, then hit the wall and rolled.

The balcony dropped away, the king looking up with shock as he lost his footing. The fall was brief. In the moonlight, Szeth watched solemnly—vision still fuzzy, blinded in one eye—as the structure crashed to the stone ground below. The wall of the palace trembled, and the crash of broken wood echoed from the nearby buildings.

Still lying on the side of the wall, Szeth groaned, climbing to his feet. He felt weak; he'd used up his Stormlight too quickly, straining his body. He stumbled down the side of the building, approaching the wreckage, barely able to remain standing.

The king was still moving. Shardplate would protect a man from such a fall, but a large length of bloodied wood stuck up through Gavilar's side, piercing him where Szeth had broken the Plate earlier. Szeth knelt down, inspecting the man's pain-wracked face. Strong features, square chin, black beard flecked with white, striking pale green eyes. Gavilar Kholin.

"I . . . expected you . . . to come," the king said between gasps.

Szeth reached underneath the front of the man's breastplate, tapping the straps there. They unfastened, and he pulled the front of the breastplate free, exposing the gemstones on its interior. Two had been cracked and burned out. Three still glowed. Numb, Szeth breathed in sharply, absorbing the Light.

The storm began to rage again. More Light rose from the side of his face, repairing his damaged skin and bones. The pain was still great; Stormlight healing was far from instantaneous. It would be hours before he recovered.

The king coughed. "You can tell . . . Thaidakar . . . that he's too late. . . ."

"I don't know who that is," Szeth said, standing, his words slurring from his broken jaw. He held his hand to the side, resummoning his Shardblade.

The king frowned. "Then who . . . ? Restares? Sadeas? I never thought . . ."
"My masters are the Parshendi," Szeth said. Ten heartbeats passed, and his Blade dropped into his hand, wet with condensation.

"The Parshendi? That makes no sense." Gavilar coughed, hand quivering, reaching toward his chest and fumbling at a pocket. He pulled out a small crystalline sphere tied to a chain. "You must take this. They must not get it." He seemed dazed. "Tell . . . tell my brother . . . he must find the most important words a man can say. . . ."

Gavilar fell still.

Szeth hesitated, then knelt down and took the sphere. It was odd, unlike any he'd seen before. Though it was completely dark, it seemed to glow somehow. With a light that was black.

The Parshendi? Gavilar had said. That makes no sense.

"Nothing makes sense anymore," Szeth whispered, tucking the strange sphere away. "It's all unraveling. I am sorry, King of the Alethi. I doubt that you care. Not anymore, at least." He stood up. "At least you won't have to watch the world ending with the rest of us."

Beside the king's body, his Shardblade materialized from mist, clattering to the stones now that its master was dead. It was worth a fortune; kingdoms had fallen as men vied to possess a single Shardblade.

Shouts of alarm came from inside the palace. Szeth needed to go. But . . .

Tell my brother . . .

To Szeth's people, a dying request was sacred. He took the king's hand, dipping it in the man's own blood, then used it to scrawl on the wood, *Brother. You must find the most important words a man can say.*

With that, Szeth escaped into the night. He left the king's Shardblade; he had no use for it. The Blade Szeth already carried was curse enough.

PART

ONE

Above Silence

KALADIN • SHALLAN





"You've killed me. Bastards, you've killed me! While the sun is still hot, I die!"

—Collected on the fifth day of the week Chach of the month Betab of the year 1171, ten seconds before death. Subject was a darkeyed soldier thirty-one years of age. Sample is considered questionable.

FIVE YEARS LATER

"I'm going to die, aren't I?" Cenn asked.

The weathered veteran beside Cenn turned and inspected him. The veteran wore a full beard, cut short. At the sides, the black hairs were starting to give way to grey.

I'm going to die, Cenn thought, clutching his spear—the shaft slick with sweat. *I'm going to die. Oh, Stormfather. I'm going to die. . . .*

"How old are you, son?" the veteran asked. Cenn didn't remember the man's name. It was hard to recall anything while watching that other army form lines across the rocky battlefield. That lining up seemed so civil. Neat, organized. Shortspears in the front ranks, longspears and javelins next, archers at the sides. The darkeyed spearmen wore equipment like Cenn's: leather jerkin and knee-length skirt with a simple steel cap and a matching breastplate.

Many of the lighteyes had full suits of armor. They sat astride horses, their honor guards clustering around them with breastplates that gleamed burgundy and deep forest green. Were there Shardbearers among them? Brightlord Amaram wasn't a Shardbearer. Were any of his men? What if

Cenn had to fight one? Ordinary men didn't kill Shardbearers. It had happened so infrequently that each occurrence was now legendary.

It's really happening, he thought with mounting terror. This wasn't a drill in the camp. This wasn't training out in the fields, swinging sticks. This was *real*. Facing that fact—his heart pounding like a frightened animal in his chest, his legs unsteady—Cenn suddenly realized that he was a coward. He shouldn't have left the herds! He should never have—

"Son?" the veteran said, voice firm. "How old are you?"

"Fifteen, sir."

"And what's your name?"

"Cenn, sir."

The mountainous, bearded man nodded. "I'm Dallet."

"Dallet," Cenn repeated, still staring out at the other army. There were so many of them! Thousands. "I'm going to die, aren't I?"

"No." Dallet had a gruff voice, but somehow that was comforting. "You're going to be just fine. Keep your head on straight. Stay with the squad."

"But I've barely had three months' training!" He swore he could hear faint clangs from the enemy's armor or shields. "I can barely hold this spear! Stormfather, I'm *dead*. I can't—"

"Son," Dallet interrupted, soft but firm. He raised a hand and placed it on Cenn's shoulder. The rim of Dallet's large round shield reflected the light from where it hung on his back. "You are *going* to be *fine*."

"How can you know?" It came out as a plea.

"Because, lad. You're in Kaladin Stormblessed's squad." The other soldiers nearby nodded in agreement.

Behind them, waves and waves of soldiers were lining up—thousands of them. Cenn was right at the front, with Kaladin's squad of about thirty other men. Why had Cenn been moved to a new squad at the last moment? It had something to do with camp politics.

Why was this squad at the very front, where casualties were bound to be the greatest? Small fearspren—like globs of purplish goo—began to climb up out of the ground and gather around his feet. In a moment of sheer panic, he nearly dropped his spear and scrambled away. Dallet's hand tightened on his shoulder. Looking up into Dallet's confident black eyes, Cenn hesitated.

"Did you piss before we formed ranks?" Dallet asked.

"I didn't have time to—"

"Go now."

"*Here?*"

"If you don't, you'll end up with it running down your leg in battle, distracting you, maybe killing you. Do it."

Embarrassed, Cenn handed Dallet his spear and relieved himself onto

the stones. When he finished, he shot glances at those next to him. None of Kaladin's soldiers smirked. They stood steady, spears to their sides, shields on their backs.

The enemy army was almost finished. The field between the two forces was bare, flat slickrock, remarkably even and smooth, broken only by occasional rockbuds. It would have made a good pasture. The warm wind blew in Cenn's face, thick with the watery scents of last night's highstorm.

"Dallet!" a voice said.

A man walked up through the ranks, carrying a shortspear that had two leather knife sheaths strapped to the haft. The newcomer was a young man—perhaps four years older than Cenn's fifteen—but he was taller by several fingers than even Dallet. He wore the common leathers of a spearman, but under them was a pair of dark trousers. That wasn't supposed to be allowed.

His black Alethi hair was shoulder-length and wavy, his eyes a dark brown. He also had knots of white cord on the shoulders of his jerkin, marking him as a squadleader.

The thirty men around Cenn snapped to attention, raising their spears in salute. *This is Kaladin Stormblessed?* Cenn thought incredulously. *This youth?*

"Dallet, we're soon going to have a new recruit," Kaladin said. He had a strong voice. "I need you to . . ." He trailed off as he noticed Cenn.

"He found his way here just a few minutes ago, sir," Dallet said with a smile. "I've been gettin' him ready."

"Well done," Kaladin said. "I paid good money to get that boy away from Gare. That man's so incompetent he might as well be fighting for the other side."

What? Cenn thought. *Why would anyone pay to get me?*

"What do you think about the field?" Kaladin asked. Several of the other spearmen nearby raised hands to shade from the sun, scanning the rocks.

"That dip next to the two boulders on the far right?" Dallet asked.

Kaladin shook his head. "Footing's too rough."

"Aye. Perhaps it is. What about the short hill over there? Far enough to avoid the first fall, close enough to not get too far ahead."

Kaladin nodded, though Cenn couldn't see what they were looking at. "Looks good."

"The rest of you louts hear that?" Dallet shouted.

The men raised their spears high.

"Keep an eye on the new boy, Dallet," Kaladin said. "He won't know the signs."

"Of course," Dallet said, smiling. Smiling! How could the man smile? The enemy army was blowing horns. Did that mean they were ready? Even

though Cenn had just relieved himself, he felt a trickle of urine run down his leg.

“Stay firm,” Kaladin said, then trotted down the front line to talk to the next squadleader over. Behind Cenn and the others, the dozens of ranks were still growing. The archers on the sides prepared to fire.

“Don’t worry, son,” Dallet said. “We’ll be fine. Squadleader Kaladin is lucky.”

The soldier on the other side of Cenn nodded. He was a lanky, red-haired Veden, with darker tan skin than the Alethi. Why was he fighting in an Alethi army? “That’s right. Kaladin, he’s stormblessed, right sure he is. We only lost . . . what, one man last battle?”

“But someone *did* die,” Cenn said.

Dallet shrugged. “People always die. Our squad loses the fewest. You’ll see.”

Kaladin finished conferring with the other squadleader, then jogged back to his team. Though he carried a shortspear—meant to be wielded one-handed with a shield in the other hand—his was a hand longer than those held by the other men.

“At the ready, men!” Dallet called. Unlike the other squadleaders, Kaladin didn’t fall into rank, but stood out in front of his squad.

The men around Cenn shuffled, excited. The sounds were repeated through the vast army, the stillness giving way before eagerness. Hundreds of feet shuffling, shields slapping, clasps clanking. Kaladin remained motionless, staring down the other army. “Steady, men,” he said without turning.

Behind, a lighteyed officer passed on horseback. “Be ready to fight! I want their blood, men. Fight and kill!”

“Steady,” Kaladin said again, after the man passed.

“Be ready to run,” Dallet said to Cenn.

“Run? But we’ve been trained to march in formation! To stay in our line!”

“Sure,” Dallet said. “But most of the men don’t have much more training than you. Those who can fight well end up getting sent to the Shattered Plains to battle the Parshendi. Kaladin’s trying to get us into shape to go there, to fight for the king.” Dallet nodded down the line. “Most of these here will break and charge; the lighteyes aren’t good enough commanders to keep them in formation. So stay with us and run.”

“Should I have my shield out?” Around Kaladin’s team, the other ranks were unhooking their shields. But Kaladin’s squad left their shields on their backs.

Before Dallet could answer, a horn blew from behind.

“Go!” Dallet said.

Cenn didn't have much choice. The entire army started moving in a clamor of marching boots. As Dallet had predicted, the steady march didn't last long. Some men began yelling, the roar taken up by others. Lighteyes called for them to go, run, fight. The line disintegrated.

As soon as that happened, Kaladin's squad broke into a dash, running out into the front at full speed. Cenn scrambled to keep up, panicked and terrified. The ground wasn't as smooth as it had seemed, and he nearly tripped on a hidden rockbud, vines withdrawn into its shell.

He righted himself and kept going, holding his spear in one hand, his shield clapping against his back. The distant army was in motion as well, their soldiers charging down the field. There was no semblance of a battle formation or a careful line. This wasn't anything like the training had claimed it would be.

Cenn didn't even know who the enemy was. A landlord was encroaching on Brightlord Amaram's territory—the land owned, ultimately, by High-prince Sadeas. It was a border skirmish, and Cenn thought it was with another Alethi principedom. Why were they fighting each other? Perhaps the king would have put a stop to it, but he was on the Shattered Plains, seeking vengeance for the murder of King Gavilar five years before.

The enemy had a lot of archers. Cenn's panic climbed to a peak as the first wave of arrows flew into the air. He stumbled again, itching to take out his shield. But Dallet grabbed his arm and yanked him forward.

Hundreds of arrows split the sky, dimming the sun. They arced and fell, dropping like skyeels upon their prey. Amaram's soldiers raised shields. But not Kaladin's squad. No shields for them.

Cenn screamed.

And the arrows slammed into the middle ranks of Amaram's army, behind him. Cenn glanced over his shoulder, still running. The arrows fell *behind* him. Soldiers screamed, arrows broke against shields; only a few straggling arrows landed anywhere near the front ranks.

"Why?" he yelled at Dallet. "How did you know?"

"They want the arrows to hit where the men are most crowded," the large man replied. "Where they'll have the greatest chance of finding a body."

Several other groups in the van left their shields lowered, but most ran awkwardly with their shields angled up to the sky, worried about arrows that wouldn't hit them. That slowed them, and they risked getting trampled by the men behind who *were* getting hit. Cenn itched to raise his shield anyway; it felt so wrong to run without it.

The second volley hit, and men screamed in pain. Kaladin's squad barreled toward the enemy soldiers, some of whom were dying to arrows from Amaram's archers. Cenn could hear the enemy soldiers bellowing war cries, could make out individual faces. Suddenly, Kaladin's squad pulled to a halt,

forming a tight group. They'd reached the small incline that Kaladin and Dallet had chosen earlier.

Dallet grabbed Cenn and shoved him to the very center of the formation. Kaladin's men lowered spears, pulling out shields as the enemy bore down on them. The charging foe used no careful formation; they didn't keep the ranks of longspears in back and shortspears in front. They all just ran forward, yelling in a frenzy.

Cenn scrambled to get his shield unlatched from his back. Clashing spears rang in the air as squads engaged one another. A group of enemy spearmen rushed up to Kaladin's squad, perhaps coveting the higher ground. The three dozen attackers had some cohesion, though they weren't in as tight a formation as Kaladin's squad was.

The enemy seemed determined to make up for it in passion; they belted and screamed in fury, rushing Kaladin's line. Kaladin's team held rank, defending Cenn as if he were some lighteyes and they were his honor guard. The two forces met with a crash of metal on wood, shields slamming together. Cenn cringed back.

It was over in a few eyeblinks. The enemy squad pulled back, leaving two dead on the stone. Kaladin's team hadn't lost anyone. They held their bristling V formation, though one man stepped back and pulled out a bandage to wrap a thigh wound. The rest of the men closed in to fill the spot. The wounded man was hulking and thick-armed; he cursed, but the wound didn't look bad. He was on his feet in a moment, but didn't return to the place where he'd been. Instead, he moved down to one end of the V formation, a more protected spot.

The battlefield was chaos. The two armies mingled indistinguishably; sounds of clanging, crunching, and screaming churned in the air. Many of the squads broke apart, members rushing from one encounter to another. They moved like hunters, groups of three or four seeking lone individuals, then brutally falling on them.

Kaladin's team held its ground, engaging only enemy squads that got too close. Was this what a battle really was? Cenn's practice had trained him for long ranks of men, shoulder to shoulder. Not this frenzied intermixing, this brutal pandemonium. Why didn't more hold formation?

The real soldiers are all gone, Cenn thought. *Off fighting in a real battle at the Shattered Plains. No wonder Kaladin wants to get his squad there.*

Spears flashed on all sides; it was difficult to tell friend from foe, despite the emblems on breastplates and colored paint on shields. The battlefield broke down into hundreds of small groups, like a thousand different wars happening at the same time.

After the first few exchanges, Dallet took Cenn by the shoulder and placed him in the rank at the very bottom of the V pattern. Cenn, however,

was worthless. When Kaladin's team engaged enemy squads, all of his training fled him. It took everything he had to just remain there, holding his spear outward and trying to look threatening.

For the better part of an hour, Kaladin's squad held their small hill, working as a team, shoulder to shoulder. Kaladin often left his position at the front, rushing this way and that, banging his spear on his shield in a strange rhythm.

Those are signals, Cenn realized as Kaladin's squad moved from the V shape into a ring. With the screams of the dying and the thousands of men calling to others, it was nearly impossible to hear a single person's voice. But the sharp clang of the spear against the metal plate on Kaladin's shield was clear. Each time they changed formations, Dallet grabbed Cenn by the shoulder and steered him.

Kaladin's team didn't chase down stragglers. They remained on the defensive. And, while several of the men in Kaladin's team took wounds, none of them fell. Their squad was too intimidating for the smaller groups, and larger enemy units retreated after a few exchanges, seeking easier foes.

Eventually something changed. Kaladin turned, watching the tides of the battle with discerning brown eyes. He raised his spear and smacked his shield in a quick rhythm he hadn't used before. Dallet grabbed Cenn by the arm and pulled him away from the small hill. Why abandon it now?

Just then, the larger body of Amaram's force broke, the men scattering. Cenn hadn't realized how poorly the battle in this quarter had been going for his side. As Kaladin's team retreated, they passed many wounded and dying, and Cenn grew nauseated. Soldiers were sliced open, their insides spilling out.

He didn't have time for horror; the retreat quickly turned into a rout. Dallet cursed, and Kaladin beat his shield again. The squad changed direction, heading eastward. There, Cenn saw, a larger group of Amaram's soldiers was holding.

But the enemy had seen the ranks break, and that made them bold. They rushed forward in clusters, like wild axehounds hunting stray hogs. Before Kaladin's team was halfway across the field of dead and dying, a large group of enemy soldiers intercepted them. Kaladin reluctantly banged his shield; his squad slowed.

Cenn felt his heart begin to thump faster and faster. Nearby, a squad of Amaram's soldiers was consumed; men stumbled and fell, screaming, trying to get away. The enemies used their spears like skewers, killing men on the ground like cremlings.

Kaladin's men met the enemy in a crash of spears and shields. Bodies shoved on all sides, and Cenn was spun about. In the jumble of friend and

foe, dying and killing, Cenn grew overwhelmed. So many men running in so many directions!

He panicked, scrambling for safety. A group of soldiers nearby wore Alethi uniforms. Kaladin's squad. Cenn ran for them, but when some turned toward him, Cenn was terrified to realize he didn't recognize them. This *wasn't* Kaladin's squad, but a small group of unfamiliar soldiers holding an uneven, broken line. Wounded and terrified, they scattered as soon as an enemy squad got close.

Cenn froze, holding his spear in a sweaty hand. The enemy soldiers charged right for him. His instincts urged him to flee, yet he had seen so many men picked off one at a time. He had to stand! He had to face them! He couldn't run, he couldn't—

He yelled, stabbing his spear at the lead soldier. The man casually knocked the weapon aside with his shield, then drove his shortspear into Cenn's thigh. The pain was hot, so hot that the blood squirting out on his leg felt cold by comparison. Cenn gasped.

The soldier yanked the weapon free. Cenn stumbled backward, dropping his spear and shield. He fell to the rocky ground, splashing in someone else's blood. His foe raised a spear high, a looming silhouette against the stark blue sky, ready to ram it into Cenn's heart.

And then *he* was there.

Squadleader. Stormblessed. Kaladin's spear came as if out of nowhere, narrowly deflecting the blow that was to have killed Cenn. Kaladin set himself in front of Cenn, alone, facing down six spearmen. He didn't flinch. He *charged*.

It happened so quickly. Kaladin swept the feet from beneath the man who had stabbed Cenn. Even as that man fell, Kaladin reached up and flipped a knife from one of the sheaths tied about his spear. His hand snapped, knife flashing and hitting the thigh of a second foe. That man fell to one knee, screaming.

A third man froze, looking at his fallen allies. Kaladin shoved past a wounded enemy and slammed his spear into the gut of the third man. A fourth man fell with a knife to the eye. When had Kaladin grabbed that knife? He spun between the last two, his spear a blur, wielding it like a quarterstaff. For a moment, Cenn thought he could see something surrounding the squadleader. A warping of the air, like the wind itself become visible.

I've lost a lot of blood. It's flowing out so quickly. . . .

Kaladin spun, knocking aside attacks, and the last two spearmen fell with gurgles that Cenn thought sounded surprised. Foes all down, Kaladin turned and knelt beside Cenn. The squadleader set aside his spear and

whipped a white strip of cloth from his pocket, then efficiently wrapped it tight around Cenn's leg. Kaladin worked with the ease of one who had bound wounds dozens of times before.

"Kaladin, sir!" Cenn said, pointing at one of the soldiers Kaladin had wounded. The enemy man held his leg as he stumbled to his feet. In a second, however, mountainous Dallet was there, shoving the foe with his shield. Dallet didn't kill the wounded man, but let him stumble away, unarmed.

The rest of the squad arrived and formed a ring around Kaladin, Dallet, and Cenn. Kaladin stood up, raising his spear to his shoulder; Dallet handed him back his knives, retrieved from the fallen foes.

"Had me worried there, sir," Dallet said. "Running off like that."

"I knew you'd follow," Kaladin said. "Raise the red banner. Cyn, Korater, you're going back with the boy. Dallet, hold here. Amaram's line is bulging in this direction. We should be safe soon."

"And you, sir?" Dallet asked.

Kaladin looked across the field. A pocket had opened in the enemy forces, and a man rode there on a white horse, swinging about him with a wicked mace. He wore full plate armor, polished and gleaming silver.

"A Shardbearer," Cenn said.

Dallet snorted. "No, thank the Stormfather. Just a lighteyed officer. Shardbearers are far too valuable to waste on a minor border dispute."

Kaladin watched the lighteyes with a seething hatred. It was the same hatred Cenn's father had shown when he'd spoken of chull rustlers, or the hatred Cenn's mother would display when someone mentioned Kusiri, who had run off with the cobbler's son.

"Sir?" Dallet said hesitantly.

"Subsquads Two and Three, pincer pattern," Kaladin said, his voice hard. "We're taking a brightlord off his throne."

"You sure that's wise, sir? We've got wounded."

Kaladin turned toward Dallet. "That's one of Hallaw's officers. He might be the one."

"You don't know that, sir."

"Regardless, he's a battalionlord. If we kill an officer that high, we're all but guaranteed to be in the next group sent to the Shattered Plains. We're taking him." His eyes grew distant. "Imagine it, Dallet. Real soldiers. A warcamp with discipline and lighteyes with integrity. A place where our fighting will *mean* something."

Dallet sighed, but nodded. Kaladin waved to a group of his soldiers; then they raced across the field. A smaller group of soldiers, including Dallet, waited behind with the wounded. One of those—a thin man with

black Alethi hair speckled with a handful of blond hairs, marking some foreign blood—pulled a long red ribbon from his pocket and attached it to his spear. He held the spear aloft, letting the ribbon flap in the wind.

“It’s a call for runners to carry our wounded off the field,” Dallet said to Cenn. “We’ll have you out of here soon. You were brave, standing against those six.”

“Fleeing seemed stupid,” Cenn said, trying to take his mind off his throbbing leg. “With so many wounded on the field, how can we think that the runners’ll come for us?”

“Squadleader Kaladin bribes them,” Dallet said. “They usually only carry off lighteyes, but there are more runners than there are wounded lighteyes. The squadleader puts most of his pay into the bribes.”

“This squad *is* different,” Cenn said, feeling light-headed.

“Told you.”

“Not because of luck. Because of training.”

“That’s part of it. Part of it is because we know if we get hurt, Kaladin will get us off the battlefield.” He paused, looking over his shoulder. As Kaladin had predicted, Amaram’s line was surging back, recovering.

The mounted enemy lighteyes from before was energetically laying about with his mace. A group of his honor guard moved to one side, engaging Kaladin’s subsquads. The lighteyes turned his horse. He wore an open-fronted helm that had sloping sides and a large set of plumes on the top. Cenn couldn’t make out his eye color, but he knew it would be blue or green, maybe yellow or light grey. He was a brightlord, chosen at birth by the Heralds, marked for rule.

He impassively regarded those who fought nearby. Then one of Kaladin’s knives took him in the right eye.

The brightlord screamed, falling back off the saddle as Kaladin somehow slipped through the lines and leaped upon him, spear raised.

“Aye, it’s part training,” Dallet said, shaking his head. “But it’s mostly him. He fights like a storm, that one, and thinks twice as fast as other men. The way he moves sometimes . . .”

“He bound my leg,” Cenn said, realizing he was beginning to speak nonsense due to the blood loss. Why point out the bound leg? It was a simple thing.

Dallet just nodded. “He knows a lot about wounds. He can read glyphs too. He’s a strange man, for a lowly darkeyed spearman, our squadleader is.” He turned to Cenn. “But you should save your strength, son. The squadleader won’t be pleased if we lose you, not after what he paid to get you.”

“Why?” Cenn asked. The battlefield was growing quieter, as if many of the dying men had already yelled themselves hoarse. Almost everyone

around them was an ally, but Dallet still watched to make sure no enemy soldiers tried to strike at Kaladin's wounded.

"Why, Dallet?" Cenn repeated, feeling urgent. "Why bring me into his squad? Why *me*?"

Dallet shook his head. "It's just how he is. Hates the thought of young kids like you, barely trained, going to battle. Every now and again, he grabs one and brings him into his squad. A good half dozen of our men were once like you." Dallet's eyes got a far-off look. "I think you all remind him of someone."

Cenn glanced at his leg. Painspren—like small orange hands with overly long fingers—were crawling around him, reacting to his agony. They began turning away, scurrying in other directions, seeking other wounded. His pain was fading, his leg—his whole body—feeling numb.

He leaned back, staring up at the sky. He could hear faint thunder. That was odd. The sky was cloudless.

Dallet cursed.

Cenn turned, shocked out of his stupor. Galloping directly toward them was a massive black horse bearing a rider in gleaming armor that seemed to radiate light. That armor was seamless—no chain underneath, just smaller plates, incredibly intricate. The figure wore an unornamented full helm, and the plate was gilded. He carried a massive sword in one hand, fully as long as a man was tall. It wasn't a simple, straight sword—it was curved, and the side that wasn't sharp was ridged, like flowing waves. Etchings covered its length.

It was beautiful. Like a work of art. Cenn had never seen a Shardbearer, but he knew immediately what this was. How could he ever have mistaken a simple armored lighteyes for one of *these* majestic creatures?

Hadn't Dallet claimed there would be no Shardbearers on this battlefield? Dallet scrambled to his feet, calling for the subsquad to form up. Cenn just sat where he was. He couldn't have stood, not with that leg wound.

He felt so light-headed. How much blood had he lost? He could barely think.

Either way, he couldn't fight. You didn't fight something like this. Sun gleamed against that plate armor. And that gorgeous, intricate, sinuous sword. It was like . . . like the Almighty himself had taken form to walk the battlefield.

And why would you want to fight the Almighty?

Cenn closed his eyes.



“Ten orders. We were loved, once. Why have you forsaken us, Almighty! Shard of my soul, where have you gone?”

—Collected on the second day of Kakash, year 1171, five seconds before death. Subject was a lighteyed woman in her third decade.

EIGHT MONTHS LATER

Kaladin’s stomach growled as he reached through the bars and accepted the bowl of slop. He pulled the small bowl—more a cup—between the bars, sniffed it, then grimaced as the caged wagon began to roll again. The sludgy grey slop was made from overcooked tallew grain, and this batch was flecked with crusted bits of yesterday’s meal.

Revolted though it was, it was all he would get. He began to eat, legs hanging out between the bars, watching the scenery pass. The other slaves in his cage clutched their bowls protectively, afraid that someone might steal from them. One of them tried to steal Kaladin’s food on the first day. He’d nearly broken the man’s arm. Now everyone left him alone.

Suited him just fine.

He ate with his fingers, careless of the dirt. He’d stopped noticing dirt months ago. He hated that he felt some of that same paranoia that the others showed. How could he not, after eight months of beatings, deprivation, and brutality?

He fought down the paranoia. He *wouldn’t* become like them. Even if he’d given up everything else—even if all had been taken from him, even

if there was no longer hope of escape. This one thing he would retain. He was a slave. But he didn't need to think like one.

He finished the slop quickly. Nearby, one of the other slaves began to cough weakly. There were ten slaves in the wagon, all men, scraggly-bearded and dirty. It was one of three wagons in their caravan through the Unclaimed Hills.

The sun blazed reddish white on the horizon, like the hottest part of a smith's fire. It lit the framing clouds with a spray of color, paint thrown carelessly on a canvas. Covered in tall, monotonously green grass, the hills seemed endless. On a nearby mound, a small figure flitted around the plants, dancing like a fluttering insect. The figure was amorphous, vaguely translucent. Windspren were devious spirits who had a penchant for staying where they weren't wanted. He'd hoped that this one had gotten bored and left, but as Kaladin tried to toss his wooden bowl aside, he found that it stuck to his fingers.

The windspren laughed, zipping by, nothing more than a ribbon of light without form. He cursed, tugging on the bowl. Windspren often played pranks like that. He pried at the bowl, and it eventually came free. Grumbling, he tossed it to one of the other slaves. The man quickly began to lick at the remnants of the slop.

"Hey," a voice whispered.

Kaladin looked to the side. A slave with dark skin and matted hair was crawling up to him, timid, as if expecting Kaladin to be angry. "You're not like the others." The slave's black eyes glanced upward, toward Kaladin's forehead, which bore three brands. The first two made a glyphpair, given to him eight months ago, on his last day in Amaram's army. The third was fresh, given to him by his most recent master. *Sbash*, the last glyph read. Dangerous.

The slave had his hand hidden behind his rags. A knife? No, that was ridiculous. None of these slaves could have hidden a weapon; the leaves hidden in Kaladin's belt were as close as one could get. But old instincts could not be banished easily, so Kaladin watched that hand.

"I heard the guards talking," the slave continued, shuffling a little closer. He had a twitch that made him blink too frequently. "You've tried to escape before, they said. You *have* escaped before."

Kaladin made no reply.

"Look," the slave said, moving his hand out from behind his rags and revealing his bowl of slop. It was half full. "Take me with you next time," he whispered. "I'll give you this. Half my food from now until we get away. Please." As he spoke, he attracted a few hungerspren. They looked like brown flies that flitted around the man's head, almost too small to see.

Kaladin turned away, looking out at the endless hills and their shifting, moving grasses. He rested one arm across the bars and placed his head against it, legs still hanging out.

“Well?” the slave asked.

“You’re an idiot. If you gave me half your food, you’d be too weak to escape if I *were* to flee. Which I won’t. It doesn’t work.”

“But—”

“Ten times,” Kaladin whispered. “Ten escape attempts in eight months, fleeing from five different masters. And how many of them worked?”

“Well . . . I mean . . . you’re still here. . . .”

Eight months. Eight months as a slave, eight months of slop and beatings. It might as well have been an eternity. He barely remembered the army anymore. “You can’t hide as a slave,” Kaladin said. “Not with that brand on your forehead. Oh, I got away a few times. But they always found me. And then back I went.”

Once, men had called him lucky. Stormblessed. Those had been lies—if anything, Kaladin had *bad* luck. Soldiers were a superstitious sort, and though he’d initially resisted that way of thinking, it was growing harder and harder. Every person he had ever tried to protect had ended up dead. Time and time again. And now, here he was, in an even worse situation than where he’d begun. It was better not to resist. This was his lot, and he was resigned to it.

There was a certain power in that, a freedom. The freedom of not having to care.

The slave eventually realized Kaladin wasn’t going to say anything further, and so he retreated, eating his slop. The wagons continued to roll, fields of green extending in all directions. The area around the rattling wagons was bare, however. When they approached, the grass pulled away, each individual stalk withdrawing into a pinprick hole in the stone. After the wagons moved on, the grass timidly poked back out and stretched its blades toward the air. And so, the cages moved along what appeared to be an open rock highway, cleared just for them.

This far into the Unclaimed Hills, the highstorms were incredibly powerful. The plants had learned to survive. That’s what you had to do, learn to survive. Brace yourself, weather the storm.

Kaladin caught a whiff of another sweaty, unwashed body and heard the sound of shuffling feet. He looked suspiciously to the side, expecting that same slave to be back.

It was a different man this time, though. He had a long black beard stuck with bits of food and snarled with dirt. Kaladin kept his own beard shorter, allowing Tvlakv’s mercenaries to hack it down periodically. Like Kaladin, the slave wore the remains of a brown sack tied with a rag, and he

was darkeyed, of course—perhaps a deep dark green, though with dark-eyes it was hard to tell. They all looked brown or black unless you caught them in the right light.

The newcomer cringed away, raising his hands. He had a rash on one hand, the skin just faintly discolored. He'd likely approached because he'd seen Kaladin respond to that other man. The slaves had been frightened of him since the first day, but they were also obviously curious.

Kaladin sighed and turned away. The slave hesitantly sat down. "Mind if I ask how you became a slave, friend? Can't help wondering. We're all wondering."

Judging by the accent and the dark hair, the man was Alethi, like Kaladin. Most of the slaves were. Kaladin didn't reply to the question.

"Me, I stole a herd of chull," the man said. He had a raspy voice, like sheets of paper rubbing together. "If I'd taken one chull, they might have just beaten me. But a whole herd. Seventeen head . . ." He chuckled to himself, admiring his own audacity.

In the far corner of the wagon, someone coughed again. They were a sorry lot, even for slaves. Weak, sickly, underfed. Some, like Kaladin, were repeat runaways—though Kaladin was the only one with a *shash* brand. They were the most worthless of a worthless caste, purchased at a steep discount. They were probably being taken for resale in a remote place where men were desperate for labor. There were plenty of small, independent cities along the coast of the Unclaimed Hills, places where Vorin rules governing the use of slaves were just a distant rumor.

Coming this way was dangerous. These lands were ruled by nobody, and by cutting across open land and staying away from established trade routes, Tvlakv could easily run afoul of unemployed mercenaries. Men who had no honor and no fear of slaughtering a slavemaster and his slaves in order to steal a few chulls and wagons.

Men who had no honor. Were there men who *had* honor?

No, Kaladin thought. *Honor died eight months ago.*

"So?" asked the scraggly-bearded man. "What did you do to get made a slave?"

Kaladin raised his arm against the bars again. "How did you get caught?"

"Odd thing, that," the man said. Kaladin hadn't answered his question, but he *had* replied. That seemed enough. "It was a woman, of course. Should have known she'd sell me."

"Shouldn't have stolen chulls. Too slow. Horses would have been better."

The man laughed riotously. "Horses? What do you think me, a madman? If I'd been caught stealing *those*, I'd have been hanged. Chulls, at least, only earned me a slave's brand."

Kaladin glanced to the side. This man's forehead brand was older than

Kaladin's, the skin around the scar faded to white. What was that glyph-pair? "*Sas morom*," Kaladin said. It was the highlord's district where the man had originally been branded.

The man looked up with shock. "Hey! You know glyphs?" Several of the slaves nearby stirred at this oddity. "You must have an even better story than I thought, friend."

Kaladin stared out over those grasses blowing in the mild breeze. Whenever the wind picked up, the more sensitive of the grass stalks shrank down into their burrows, leaving the landscape patchy, like the coat of a sickly horse. That windspren was still there, moving between patches of grass. How long had it been following him? At least a couple of months now. That was downright odd. Maybe it wasn't the same one. They were impossible to tell apart.

"Well?" the man prodded. "Why are you here?"

"There are many reasons why I'm here," Kaladin said. "Failures. Crimes. Betrayals. Probably the same for most every one of us."

Around him, several of the men grunted in agreement; one of those grunts then degenerated into a hacking cough. *Persistent coughing*, a part of Kaladin's mind thought, *accompanied by an excess of phlegm and fevered mumbling at night. Sounds like the grindings.*

"Well," the talkative man said, "perhaps I should ask a different question. Be more specific, that's what my mother always said. Say what you mean and ask for what you want. What's the story of you getting that first brand of yours?"

Kaladin sat, feeling the wagon thump and roll beneath him. "I killed a lighteyes."

His unnamed companion whistled again, this time even more appreciative than before. "I'm surprised they let you live."

"Killing the lighteyes isn't why I was made a slave," Kaladin said. "It's the one I *didn't* kill that's the problem."

"How's that?"

Kaladin shook his head, then stopped answering the talkative man's questions. The man eventually wandered to the front of the wagon's cage and sat down, staring at his bare feet.



Hours later, Kaladin still sat in his place, idly fingering the glyphs on his forehead. This was his life, day in and day out, riding in these cursed wagons.

His first brands had healed long ago, but the skin around the *shash* brand was red, irritated, and crusted with scabs. It throbbed, almost like a

second heart. It hurt even worse than the burn had when he grabbed the heated handle of a cooking pot as a child.

Lessons drilled into Kaladin by his father whispered in the back of his brain, giving the proper way to care for a burn. Apply a salve to prevent infection, wash once daily. Those memories weren't a comfort; they were an annoyance. He didn't *have* fourleaf sap or lister's oil; he didn't even have water for the washing.

The parts of the wound that had scabbed over pulled at his skin, making his forehead feel tight. He could barely pass a few minutes without scrunching up his brow and irritating the wound. He'd grown accustomed to reaching up and wiping away the streaks of blood that trickled from the cracks; his right forearm was smeared with it. If he'd had a mirror, he could probably have spotted tiny red rotspren gathering around the wound.

The sun set in the west, but the wagons kept rolling. Violet Salas peeked over the horizon to the east, seeming hesitant at first, as if making sure the sun had vanished. It was a clear night, and the stars shivered high above. Taln's Scar—a swath of deep red stars that stood out vibrantly from the twinkling white ones—was high in the sky this season.

That slave who'd been coughing earlier was at it again. A ragged, wet cough. Once, Kaladin would have been quick to go help, but something within him had changed. So many people he'd tried to help were now dead. It seemed to him—irrationally—that the man would be better off without his interference. After failing Tien, then Dallet and his team, then ten successive groups of slaves, it was hard to find the will to try again.

Two hours past First Moon, Tvlakv finally called a halt. His two brutish mercenaries climbed from their places atop their wagons, then moved to build a small fire. Lanky Taran—the serving boy—tended the chulls. The large crustaceans were nearly as big as wagons themselves. They settled down, pulling into their shells for the night with clawfuls of grain. Soon they were nothing more than three lumps in the darkness, barely distinguishable from boulders. Finally, Tvlakv began checking on the slaves one at a time, giving each a ladle of water, making certain his investments were healthy. Or, at least, as healthy as could be expected for this poor lot.

Tvlakv started with the first wagon, and Kaladin—still sitting—pushed his fingers into his makeshift belt, checking on the leaves he'd hidden there. They crackled satisfactorily, the stiff, dried husks rough against his skin. He still wasn't certain what he was going to do with them. He'd grabbed them on a whim during one of the sessions when he'd been allowed out of the wagon to stretch his legs. He doubted anyone else in the caravan knew how to recognize blackbane—narrow leaves on a trefoil prong—so it hadn't been too much of a risk.

Absently, he took the leaves out and rubbed them between forefinger and palm. They had to dry before reaching their potency. Why did he carry them? Did he mean to give them to Tvlakv and get revenge? Or were they a contingency, to be retained in case things got too bad, too unbearable?

Surely I haven't fallen that far, he thought. It was just more likely his instinct of securing a weapon when he saw one, no matter how unusual. The landscape was dark. Salas was the smallest and dimmest of the moons, and while her violet coloring had inspired countless poets, she didn't do much to help you see your hand in front of your face.

"Oh!" a soft, feminine voice said. "What's that?"

A translucent figure—just a handspan tall—peeked up from over the edge of the floor near Kaladin. She climbed up and into the wagon, as if scaling some high plateau. The windspren had taken the shape of a young woman—larger spren could change shapes and sizes—with an angular face and long, flowing hair that faded into mist behind her head. She—Kaladin couldn't help but think of the windspren as a she—was formed of pale blues and whites and wore a simple, flowing white dress of a girlish cut that came down to midcalf. Like the hair, it faded to mist at the very bottom. Her feet, hands, and face were crisply distinct, and she had the hips and bust of a slender woman.

Kaladin frowned at the spirit. Spren were all around; you just ignored them most of the time. But this one was an oddity. The windspren walked upward, as if climbing an invisible staircase. She reached a height where she could stare at Kaladin's hand, so he closed his fingers around the black leaves. She walked around his fist in a circle. Although she glowed like an afterimage from looking at the sun, her form provided no real illumination.

She bent down, looking at his hand from different angles, like a child expecting to find a hidden piece of candy. "What is it?" Her voice was like a whisper. "You can show me. I won't tell anyone. Is it a treasure? Have you cut off a piece of the night's cloak and tucked it away? Is it the heart of a beetle, so tiny yet powerful?"

He said nothing, causing the spren to pout. She floated up, hovering though she had no wings, and looked him in the eyes. "Kaladin, why must you ignore me?"

Kaladin started. "What did you say?"

She smiled mischievously, then sprang away, her figure blurring into a long white ribbon of blue-white light. She shot between the bars—twisting and warping in the air, like a strip of cloth caught in the wind—and darted beneath the wagon.

"Storm you!" Kaladin said, leaping to his feet. "Spirit! What did you say? Repeat that!" Spren didn't use people's names. Spren weren't intelligent.

The larger ones—like windspren or riverspren—could mimic voices and expressions, but they didn't actually think. They didn't . . .

"Did any of you hear that?" Kaladin asked, turning to the cage's other occupants. The roof was just high enough to let Kaladin stand. The others were lying back, waiting to get their ladle of water. He got no response beyond a few mutters to be quiet and some coughs from the sick man in the corner. Even Kaladin's "friend" from earlier ignored him. The man had fallen into a stupor, staring at his feet, wiggling his toes periodically.

Maybe they hadn't seen the spren. Many of the larger ones were invisible except to the person they were tormenting. Kaladin sat back down on the floor of the wagon, hanging his legs outside. The windspren *had* said his name, but undoubtedly she'd just repeated what she'd heard before. But . . . none of the men in the cage knew his name.

Maybe I'm going mad, Kaladin thought. Seeing things that aren't there. Hearing voices.

He took a deep breath, then opened his hand. His grip had cracked and broken the leaves. He'd need to tuck them away to prevent further—

"Those leaves look interesting," said that same feminine voice. "You like them a lot, don't you?"

Kaladin jumped, twisting to the side. The windspren stood in the air just beside his head, white dress rippling in a wind Kaladin couldn't feel.

"How do you know my name?" he demanded.

The windspren didn't answer. She walked on air over to the bars, then poked her head out, watching Tvlakv the slaver administer drinks to the last few slaves in the first wagon. She looked back at Kaladin. "Why don't you fight? You did before. Now you've stopped."

"Why do you care, spirit?"

She cocked her head. "I don't know," she said, as if surprised at herself. "But I do. Isn't that odd?"

It was more than odd. What did he make of a spren that not only used his name, but seemed to *remember* things he had done weeks ago?

"People don't eat leaves, you know, Kaladin," she said, folding translucent arms. Then she cocked her head. "Or do you? I can't remember. You're so strange, stuffing some things into your mouths, leaking out other things when you don't think anyone is looking."

"How do you know my name?" he whispered.

"How do *you* know it?"

"I know it because . . . because it's mine. My parents told it to me. I don't know."

"Well I don't either," she said, nodding as if she'd just won some grand argument.

“Fine,” he said. “But why are you *using* my name?”

“Because it’s polite. And you are *impolite*.”

“Spren don’t know what that means!”

“See, there,” she said, pointing at him. “Impolite.”

Kaladin blinked. Well, he was far from where he’d grown up, walking foreign stone and eating foreign food. Perhaps the spren who lived here were different from those back home.

“So why don’t you fight?” she asked, flitting down to rest on his legs, looking up at his face. She had no weight that he could feel.

“I can’t fight,” he said softly.

“You did before.”

He closed his eyes and rested his head forward against the bars. “I’m so tired.” He didn’t mean the physical fatigue, though eight months eating leftovers had stolen much of the lean strength he’d cultivated while at war. He *felt* tired. Even when he got enough sleep. Even on those rare days when he wasn’t hungry, cold, or stiff from a beating. So tired . . .

“You have been tired before.”

“I’ve failed, spirit,” he replied, squeezing his eyes shut. “Must you torment me so?”

They were all dead. Cenn and Dallet, and before that Tukks and the Takers. Before that, Tien. Before that, blood on his hands and the corpse of a young girl with pale skin.

Some of the slaves nearby muttered, likely thinking he was mad. Anyone could end up drawing a spren, but you learned early that talking to one was pointless. *Was* he mad? Perhaps he should wish for that—madness was an escape from the pain. Instead, it terrified him.

He opened his eyes. Tvlakv was finally waddling up to Kaladin’s wagon with his bucket of water. The portly, brown-eyed man walked with a very faint limp; the result of a broken leg, perhaps. He was Thaylen, and all Thaylen men had the same stark white beards—regardless of their age or the color of the hair on their heads—and white eyebrows. Those eyebrows grew very long, and the Thaylen wore them pushed back over the ears. That made him appear to have two white streaks in his otherwise black hair.

His clothing—striped trousers of black and red with a dark blue sweater that matched the color of his knit cap—had once been fine, but it was now growing ragged. Had he once been something other than a slaver? This life—the casual buying and selling of human flesh—seemed to have an effect on men. It wearied the soul, even if it did fill one’s money pouch.

Tvlakv kept his distance from Kaladin, carrying his oil lantern over to inspect the coughing slave at the front of the cage. Tvlakv called to his mercenaries. Bluth—Kaladin didn’t know why he’d bothered to learn their names—wandered over. Tvlakv spoke quietly, pointing at the slave. Bluth

nodded, slablike face shadowed in the lanternlight, and pulled the cudgel free from his belt.

The windspren took the form of a white ribbon, then zipped over toward the sick man. She spun and twisted a few times before landing on the floor, becoming a girl again. She leaned in to inspect the man. Like a curious child.

Kaladin turned away and closed his eyes, but he could still hear the coughing. Inside his mind, his father's voice responded. *To cure the grinding coughs, said the careful, precise tone, administer two handfuls of bloodivy, crushed to a powder, each day. If you don't have that, be certain to give the patient plenty of liquids, preferably with sugar stirred in. As long as the patient stays hydrated, he will most likely survive. The disease sounds far worse than it is.*

Most likely survive . . .

Those coughs continued. Someone unlatched the cage door. Would they know how to help the man? Such an easy solution. Give him water, and he would live.

It didn't matter. Best not to get involved.

Men dying on the battlefield. A youthful face, so familiar and dear, looking to Kaladin for salvation. A sword wound slicing open the side of a neck. A Shardbearer charging through Amaram's ranks.

Blood. Death. Failure. Pain.

And his father's voice. *Can you really leave him, son? Let him die when you could have helped?*

Storm it!

"Stop!" Kaladin yelled, standing.

The other slaves scrambled back. Bluth jumped up, slamming the cage door closed and holding up his cudgel. Tvlakv shied behind the mercenary, using him as cover.

Kaladin took a deep breath, closing his hand around the leaves and then raising the other to his head, wiping away a smear of blood. He crossed the small cage, bare feet thumping on the wood. Bluth glared as Kaladin knelt beside the sick man. The flickering light illuminated a long, drawn face and nearly bloodless lips. The man had coughed up phlegm; it was greenish and solid. Kaladin felt the man's neck for swelling, then checked his dark brown eyes.

"It's called the grinding coughs," Kaladin said. "He will live, if you give him an extra ladle of water every two hours for five days or so. You'll have to force it down his throat. Mix in sugar, if you have any."

Bluth scratched at his ample chin, then glanced at the shorter slaver.

"Pull him out," Tvlakv said.

The wounded slave awoke as Bluth unlocked the cage. The mercenary waved Kaladin back with his cudgel, and Kaladin reluctantly withdrew.

After putting away his cudgel, Bluth grabbed the slave under the arms and dragged him out, all the while trying to keep a nervous eye on Kaladin. Kaladin's last failed escape attempt had involved twenty armed slaves. His master should have executed him for that, but he had claimed Kaladin was "intriguing" and branded him with *shash*, then sold him for a pittance.

There always seemed to be a reason Kaladin survived when those he'd tried to help died. Some men might have seen that as a blessing, but he saw it as an ironic kind of torment. He'd spent some time under his previous master speaking with a slave from the West, a Selay man who had spoken of the Old Magic from their legends and its ability to curse people. Could that be what was happening to Kaladin?

Don't be foolish, he told himself.

The cage door snapped back in place, locking. The cages were necessary—Tvlakv had to protect his fragile investment from the highstorms. The cages had wooden sides that could be pulled up and locked into place during the furious gales.

Bluth dragged the slave over to the fire, beside the unpacked water barrel. Kaladin felt himself relax. *There*, he told himself. *Perhaps you can still help. Perhaps there's a reason to care.*

Kaladin opened his hand and looked down at the crumbled black leaves in his palm. He didn't need these. Sneaking them into Tvlakv's drink would not only be difficult, but pointless. Did he really want the slaver dead? What would that accomplish?

A low crack rang in the air, followed by a second one, duller, like someone dropping a bag of grain. Kaladin snapped his head up, looking to where Bluth had deposited the sick slave. The mercenary raised his cudgel one more time, then snapped it down, the weapon making a cracking sound as it hit the slave's skull.

The slave hadn't uttered a cry of pain or protest. His corpse slumped over in the darkness; Bluth casually picked it up and slung it over his shoulder.

"No!" Kaladin yelled, leaping across the cage and slamming his hands against the bars.

Tvlakv stood warming himself by the fire.

"Storm you!" Kaladin screamed. "He could have lived, you bastard!"

Tvlakv glanced at him. Then, leisurely, the slaver walked over, straightening his deep blue knit cap. "He would have gotten you all sick, you see." His voice was lightly accented, smashing words together, not giving the proper syllables emphasis. They always sounded to Kaladin like they were mumbling. "I would not lose an entire wagon for one man."

"He's past the spreading stage!" Kaladin said, slamming his hands against the bars again. "If any of us were going to catch it, we'd have done so by now."

"Hope that you don't. I think he was past saving."

“I told you otherwise!”

“And I should believe you, deserter?” Tvlakv said, amused. “A man with eyes that smolder and hate? You would kill me.” He shrugged. “I care not. So long as you are strong when it is time for sales. You should bless me for saving you from that man’s sickness.”

“I’ll bless your cairn when I pile it up myself,” Kaladin replied.

Tvlakv smiled, walking back toward the fire. “Keep that fury, deserter, and that strength. It will pay me well on our arrival.”

Not if you don’t live that long, Kaladin thought. Tvlakv always warmed the last of the water from the bucket he used for the slaves. He’d make himself tea from it, hanging it over the fire. If Kaladin made sure he was watered last, then powdered the leaves and dropped them into the—

Kaladin froze, then looked down at his hands. In his haste, he’d forgotten that he’d been holding the blackbane. He’d dropped the flakes as he slammed his hands against the bars. Only a few bits stuck to his palms, not enough to be potent.

He spun to look backward; the floor of the cage was dirty and covered with grime. If the flakes had fallen there, there was no way to collect them. The wind gathered suddenly, blowing dust, crumbs, and dirt out of the wagon and into the night.

Even in this, Kaladin failed.

He sank down, his back to the bars, and bowed his head. Defeated. That cursed windspren kept darting around him, looking confused.

Skypeeps

Skypeeps are common near most coastal cities we pass. I had read of them often, and was excited to see them. Most are between 1 and 5 feet long, though I spotted one monster that must have been 7 feet from snout to tail.



They are so graceful and fluid in the air, often accompanied by dozens of tiny ones, flying around them in a swarm as if riding their wakes. The sailors call them "luckopren" - I doubt it is their true name.



How does the creature stay in the air? I noticed some sort of pouch under each wing that deflates as it dives.

They catch fish just below the water's surface, or crabs and rats on the docks, and are as nearly as graceful when on land.





“A man stood on a cliffside and watched his homeland fall into dust. The waters surged beneath, so far beneath. And he heard a child crying. They were his own tears.”

—Collected on the 4th of Tanates, year 1171, thirty seconds before death. Subject was a cobbler of some renown.

Kharbranth, City of Bells, was not a place that Shallan had ever imagined she would visit. Though she'd often dreamed of traveling, she'd expected to spend her early life sequestered in her family's manor, only escaping through the books of her father's library. She'd expected to marry one of her father's allies, then spend the rest of her life sequestered in *his* manor.

But expectations were like fine pottery. The harder you held them, the more likely they were to crack.

She found herself breathless, clutching her leather-bound drawing pad to her chest as longshoremen pulled the ship into the dock. Kharbranth was enormous. Built up the side of a steep incline, the city was wedge-shaped, as if it were built into a wide crack, with the open side toward the ocean. The buildings were blocky, with square windows, and appeared to have been constructed of some kind of mud or daub. Crem, perhaps? They were painted bright colors, reds and oranges most often, but occasional blues and yellows too.

She could hear the bells already, tinkling in the wind, ringing with pure voices. She had to strain her neck to look up toward the city's loftiest rim; Kharbranth was like a mountain towering over her. How many people

lived in a place like this? Thousands? Tens of thousands? She shivered again—daunted yet excited—then blinked pointedly, fixing the image of the city in her memory.

Sailors rushed about. The *Wind's Pleasure* was a narrow, single-masted vessel, barely large enough for her, the captain, his wife, and the half-dozen crew. It had seemed so small at first, but Captain Tozbek was a calm and cautious man, an excellent sailor, even if he was a pagan. He'd guided the ship with care along the coast, always finding a sheltered cove to ride out highstorms.

The captain oversaw the work as the men secured the mooring. Tozbek was a short man, even-shouldered with Shallan, and he wore his long white Thaylen eyebrows up in a curious spiked pattern. It was like he had two waving fans above his eyes, a foot long each. He wore a simple knit cap and a silver-buttoned black coat. She'd imagined him getting that scar on his jaw in a furious sea battle with pirates. The day before, she'd been disappointed to hear it had been caused by loose tackle during rough weather.

His wife, Ashly, was already walking down the gangplank to register their vessel. The captain saw Shallan inspecting him, and so walked over. He was a business connection of her family's, long trusted by her father. That was good, since the plan she and her brothers had concocted had contained no place for her bringing along a lady-in-waiting or nurse.

That plan made Shallan nervous. Very, *very* nervous. She hated being duplicitous. But the financial state of her house . . . They either needed a spectacular infusion of wealth or some other edge in local Veden house politics. Otherwise, they wouldn't last the year.

First things first, Shallan thought, forcing herself to be calm. *Find Jasnah Kholin. Assuming she hasn't moved off without you again.*

"I've sent a lad on your behalf, Brightness," Tozbek said. "If the princess is still here, we shall soon know."

Shallan nodded gratefully, still clutching her drawing pad. Out in the city, there were people *everywhere*. Some wore familiar clothing—trousers and shirts that laced up the front for the men, skirts and colorful blouses for the women. Those could have been from her homeland, Jah Keved. But Kharbranth was a free city. A small, politically fragile city-state, it held little territory but had docks open to all ships that passed, and it asked no questions about nationality or status. People flowed to it.

That meant many of the people she saw were exotic. Those single-sheet wraps would mark a man or woman from Tashikk, far to the west. The long coats, enveloping down to the ankles, but open in the front like cloaks . . . where were those from? She'd rarely seen so many parshmen as she noted working the docks, carrying cargo on their backs. Like the parsh-

men her father had owned, these were stout and thick of limb, with their odd marbled skin—some parts pale or black, others a deep crimson. The mottled pattern was unique to each individual.

After chasing Jasnah Kholin from town to town for the better part of six months, Shallan was beginning to think she'd never catch the woman. Was the princess avoiding her? No, that didn't seem likely—Shallan just wasn't important enough to wait for. Brightness Jasnah Kholin was one of the most powerful women in the world. And one of the most infamous. She was the only member of a faithful royal house who was a professed heretic.

Shallan tried not to grow anxious. Most likely, they'd discover that Jasnah had moved on again. The *Wind's Pleasure* would dock for the night, and Shallan would negotiate a price with the captain—steeply discounted, because of her family's investments in Tozbek's shipping business—to take her to the next port.

Already, they were months past the time when Tozbek had expected to be rid of her. She'd never sensed resentment from him; his honor and loyalty kept him agreeing to her requests. However, his patience wouldn't last forever, and neither would her money. She'd already used over half the spheres she'd brought with her. He wouldn't abandon her in an unfamiliar city, of course, but he might regretfully insist on taking her back to Vedenar.

"Captain!" a sailor said, rushing up the gangplank. He wore only a vest and loose, baggy trousers, and had the darkly tanned skin of one who worked in the sun. "No message, sir. Dock registrar says that Jasnah hasn't left yet."

"Ha!" the captain said, turning to Shallan. "The hunt is over!"

"Bless the Heralds," Shallan said softly.

The captain smiled, flamboyant eyebrows looking like streaks of light coming from his eyes. "It must be your beautiful face that brought us this favorable wind! The windspren themselves were entranced by you, Brightness Shallan, and led us here!"

Shallan blushed, considering a response that wasn't particularly proper.

"Ah!" the captain said, pointing at her. "I can see you have a reply—I see it in your eyes, young miss! Spit it out. Words aren't meant to be kept inside, you see. They are free creatures, and if locked away will unsettle the stomach."

"It's not polite," Shallan protested.

Tozbek bellowed a laugh. "Months of travel, and still you claim that! I keep telling you that we're sailors! We forgot how to be polite the moment we set first foot on a ship; we're far beyond redemption now."

She smiled. She'd been trained by stern nurses and tutors to hold her tongue—unfortunately, her brothers had been even more determined in

encouraging her to do the opposite. She'd made a habit of entertaining them with witty comments when nobody else was near. She thought fondly of hours spent by the crackling greatroom hearth, the younger three of her four brothers huddled around her, listening as she made sport of their father's newest sycophant or a traveling ardent. She'd often fabricated silly versions of conversations to fill the mouths of people they could see, but not hear.

That had established in her what her nurses had referred to as an "inso- lent streak." And the sailors were even more appreciative of a witty com- ment than her brothers had been.

"Well," Shallan said to the captain, blushing but still eager to speak, "I was just thinking this: You say that my beauty coaxed the winds to deliver us to Kharbranth with haste. But wouldn't that imply that on other trips, my lack of beauty was to blame for us arriving late?"

"Well . . . er . . ."

"So in reality," Shallan said, "you're telling me I'm beautiful precisely one-sixth of the time."

"Nonsense! Young miss, you're like a morning sunrise, you are!"

"Like a sunrise? By that you mean entirely too crimson"—she pulled at her long red hair—"and prone to making men grouchy when they see me?"

He laughed, and several of the sailors nearby joined in. "All right then," Captain Tozbek said, "you're like a flower."

She grimaced. "I'm allergic to flowers."

He raised an eyebrow.

"No, really," she admitted. "I think they're quite captivating. But if you were to give me a bouquet, you'd soon find me in a fit so energetic that it would have you searching the walls for stray freckles I might have blown free with the force of my sneezes."

"Well, be that true, I still say you're as *pretty* as a flower."

"If I am, then young men my age must be afflicted with the same allergy—for they keep their distance from me noticeably." She winced. "Now, see, I told you this wasn't polite. Young women should not act in such an irritable way."

"Ah, young miss," the captain said, tipping his knit cap toward her. "The lads and I will miss your clever tongue. I'm not sure what we'll do without you."

"Sail, likely," she said. "And eat, and sing, and watch the waves. All the things you do now, only you shall have rather *more* time to accomplish all of it, as you won't be stumbling across a youthful girl as she sits on your deck sketching and mumbling to herself. But you have my thanks, Captain, for a trip that was wonderful—if somewhat exaggerated in length."

64 He tipped his cap to her in acknowledgment.

Shallan grinned—she hadn't expected being out on her own to be so liberating. Her brothers had worried that she'd be frightened. They saw her as timid because she didn't like to argue and remained quiet when large groups were talking. And perhaps she *was* timid—being away from Jah Keved was daunting. But it was also wonderful. She'd filled three sketchbooks with pictures of the creatures and people she'd seen, and while her worry over her house's finances was a perpetual cloud, it was balanced by the sheer delight of experience.

Tozbek began making dock arrangements for his ship. He was a good man. As for his praise of her supposed beauty, she took that for what it was. A kind, if overstated, mark of affection. She was pale-skinned in an era when Alethi tan was seen as the mark of true beauty, and though she had light blue eyes, her impure family line was manifest in her auburn-red hair. Not a single lock of proper black. Her freckles had faded as she reached young womanhood—Heralds be blessed—but there were still some visible, dusting her cheeks and nose.

"Young miss," the captain said to her after conferring with his men, "Your Brightness Jasnah, she'll undoubtedly be at the Conclave, you see."

"Oh, where the Palanaeum is?"

"Yes, yes. And the king lives there too. It's the center of the city, so to speak. Except it's on the top." He scratched his chin. "Well, anyway, Brightness Jasnah Kholin is sister to a king; she will stay nowhere else, not in Kharbranth. Yalb here will show you the way. We can deliver your trunk later."

"Many thanks, Captain," she said. "*Shaylor mkabat nour.*" *The winds have brought us safely.* A phrase of thanks in the Thaylen language.

The captain smiled broadly. "*Mkai bade fortenthis!*"

She had no idea what that meant. Her Thaylen was quite good when she was reading, but hearing it spoken was something else entirely. She smiled at him, which seemed the proper response, for he laughed, gesturing to one of his sailors.

"We'll wait here in this dock for two days," he told her. "There is a high-storm coming tomorrow, you see, so we cannot leave. If the situation with the Brightness Jasnah does not proceed as hoped, we'll take you back to Jah Keved."

"Thank you again."

"'Tis nothing, young miss," he said. "Nothing but what we'd be doing anyway. We can take on goods here and all. Besides, that's a right nice likeness of my wife you gave me for my cabin. Right nice."

He strode over to Yalb, giving him instructions. Shallan waited, putting her drawing pad back into her leather portfolio. Yalb. The name was difficult for her Veden tongue to pronounce. Why were the Thaylens so fond of mashing letters together, without proper vowels?

Yalb waved for her. She moved to follow.

“Be careful with yourself, lass,” the captain warned as she passed. “Even a safe city like Kharbranth hides dangers. Keep your wits about you.”

“I should think I’d prefer my wits inside my skull, Captain,” she replied, carefully stepping onto the gangplank. “If I keep them ‘about me’ instead, then someone has gotten entirely too close to my head with a cudgel.”

The captain laughed, waving her farewell as she made her way down the gangplank, holding the railing with her freehand. Like all Vorin women, she kept her left hand—her safehand—covered, exposing only her freehand. Common darkeyed women would wear a glove, but a woman of her rank was expected to show more modesty than that. In her case, she kept her safehand covered by the oversized cuff of her left sleeve, which was buttoned closed.

The dress was of a traditional Vorin cut, formfitting through the bust, shoulders, and waist, with a flowing skirt below. It was blue silk with chull-shell buttons up the sides, and she carried her satchel by pressing it to her chest with her safehand while holding the railing with her freehand.

She stepped off the gangplank into the furious activity of the docks, messengers running this way and that, women in red coats tracking cargos on ledgers. Kharbranth was a Vorin kingdom, like Alethkar and like Shallan’s own Jah Keved. They weren’t pagans here, and writing was a feminine art; men learned only glyphs, leaving letters and reading to their wives and sisters.

She hadn’t asked, but she was certain Captain Tozbek could read. She’d seen him holding books; it had made her uncomfortable. Reading was an unseemly trait in a man. At least, men who weren’t ardents.

“You wanna ride?” Yalb asked her, his rural Thaylen dialect so thick she could barely make out the words.

“Yes, please.”

He nodded and rushed off, leaving her on the docks, surrounded by a group of parshmen who were laboriously moving wooden crates from one pier to another. Parshmen were thick-witted, but they made excellent workers. Never complaining, always doing as they were told. Her father had preferred them to ordinary slaves.

Were the Alethi really fighting *parshmen* out on the Shattered Plains? That seemed so odd to Shallan. Parshmen didn’t fight. They were docile and practically mute. Of course, from what she’d heard, the ones out on the Shattered Plains—the Parshendi, they were called—were physically different from normal parshmen. Stronger, taller, keener of mind. Perhaps they weren’t really parshmen at all, but distant relatives of some kind.

To her surprise, she could see signs of animal life all around the docks. A few skyeels undulated through the air, searching for rats or fish. Tiny crabs hid between cracks in the dock’s boards, and a cluster of haspers clung

to the dock's thick logs. In a street inland of the docks, a prowling mink skulked in the shadows, watching for morsels that might be dropped.

She couldn't resist pulling open her portfolio and beginning a sketch of a pouncing skyeel. Wasn't it afraid of all the people? She held her sketchpad with her safehand, hidden fingers wrapping around the top as she used a charcoal pencil to draw. Before she was finished, her guide returned with a man pulling a curious contraption with two large wheels and a canopy-covered seat. She hesitantly lowered her sketchpad. She'd expected a palanquin.

The man pulling the machine was short and dark-skinned, with a wide smile and full lips. He gestured for Shallan to sit, and she did so with the modest grace her nurses had drilled into her. The driver asked her a question in a clipped, terse-sounding language she didn't recognize.

"What was that?" she asked Yalb.

"He wants to know if you'd like to be pulled the long way or the short way." Yalb scratched his head. "I'm not right sure what the difference is."

"I suspect one takes longer," Shallan said.

"Oh, you *are* a clever one." Yalb said something to the porter in that same clipped language, and the man responded.

"The long way gives a good view of the city," Yalb said. "The short way goes straight up to the Conclave. Not many good views, he says. I guess he noticed you were new to the city."

"Do I stand out that much?" Shallan asked, flushing.

"Eh, no, of course not, Brightness."

"And by that you mean that I'm as obvious as a wart on a queen's nose."

Yalb laughed. "Afraid so. But you can't go someplace a second time until you been there a first time, I reckon. Everyone has to stand out sometime, so you might as well do it in a pretty way like yourself!"

She'd had to get used to gentle flirtation from the sailors. They were never too forward, and she suspected the captain's wife had spoken to them sternly when she'd noticed how it made Shallan blush. Back at her father's manor, servants—even those who had been full citizens—had been afraid to step out of their places.

The porter was still waiting for an answer. "The short way, please," she told Yalb, though she longed to take the scenic path. She was finally in a *real* city and she took the direct route? But Brightness Jasnah had proven to be as elusive as a wild songling. Best to be quick.

The main roadway cut up the hillside in switchbacks, and so even the short way gave her time to see much of the city. It proved intoxicatingly rich with strange people, sights, and ringing bells. Shallan sat back and took it all in. Buildings were grouped by color, and that color seemed to indicate purpose. Shops selling the same items would be painted the same

shades—violet for clothing, green for foods. Homes had their own pattern, though Shallan couldn't interpret it. The colors were soft, with a washed-out, subdued tonality.

Yalb walked alongside her cart, and the porter began to talk back toward her. Yalb translated, hands in the pockets of his vest. "He says that the city is special because of the lait here."

Shallan nodded. Many cities were built in laits—areas protected from the highstorms by nearby rock formations.

"Kharbranth is one of the most sheltered major cities in the world," Yalb continued, translating, "and the bells are a symbol of that. It's said they were first erected to warn that a highstorm was blowing, since the winds were so soft that people didn't always notice." Yalb hesitated. "He's just saying things because he wants a big tip, Brightness. I've heard that story, but I think it's blustering ridiculous. If the winds blew strong enough to move bells, then people'd notice. Besides, people didn't notice it was *raining* on their blustering heads?"

Shallan smiled. "It's all right. He can continue."

The porter chatted on in his clipped voice—what language *was* that, anyway? Shallan listened to Yalb's translation, drinking in the sights, sounds, and—unfortunately—scents. She'd grown up accustomed to the crisp smell of freshly dusted furniture and flatbread baking in the kitchens. Her ocean journey had taught her new scents, of brine and clean sea air.

There was nothing clean in what she smelled here. Each passing alleyway had its own unique array of revolting stench. These alternated with the spicy scents of street vendors and their foods, and the juxtaposition was even more nauseating. Fortunately, her porter moved into the central part of the roadway, and the stench abated, though it did slow them as they had to contend with thicker traffic. She gawked at those they passed. Those men with gloved hands and faintly bluish skin were from Natanatan. But who were those tall, stately people dressed in robes of black? And the men with their beards bound in cords, making them rodlike?

The sounds put Shallan in mind of the competing choruses of wild songlings near her home, only multiplied in variety and volume. A hundred voices called to one another, mingling with doors slamming, wheels rolling on stone, occasional skyeels crying. The ever-present bells tinkled in the background, louder when the wind blew. They were displayed in the windows of shops, hung from rafters. Each lantern pole along the street had a bell hung under the lamp, and her cart had a small silvery one at the very tip of its canopy. When she was about halfway up the hillside, a rolling wave of loud clock bells rang the hour. The varied, unsynchronized chimes made a clangorous din.

The crowds thinned as they reached the upper quarter of the city, and eventually her porter pulled her to a massive building at the very apex of the city. Painted white, it was carved from the rock face itself, rather than built of bricks or clay. The pillars out front grew seamlessly from the stone, and the back side of the building melded smoothly into the cliff. The outcroppings of roof had squat domes atop them, and were painted in metallic colors. Lighteyed women passed in and out, carrying scribing utensils and wearing dresses like Shallan's, their left hands properly cuffed. The men entering or leaving the building wore military-style Vorin coats and stiff trousers, buttons up the sides and ending in a stiff collar that wrapped the entire neck. Many carried swords at their waists, the belts wrapping around the knee-length coats.

The porter stopped and made a comment to Yalb. The sailor began arguing with him, hands on hips. Shallan smiled at his stern expression, and she blinked pointedly, affixing the scene in her memory for later sketching.

"He's offering to split the difference with me if I let him inflate the price of the trip," Yalb said, shaking his head and offering a hand to help Shal-lan from the cart. She stepped down, looking at the porter, who shrugged, smiling like a child who had been caught sneaking sweets.

She clutched her satchel with her cuffed arm, searching through it with her freehand for her money pouch. "How much should I actually give him?"

"Two clearchips should be more than enough. I'd have offered one. The thief wanted to ask for *five*."

Before this trip, she'd never used money; she'd just admired the spheres for their beauty. Each one was composed of a glass bead a little larger than a person's thumbnail with a much smaller gemstone set at the center. The gemstones could absorb Stormlight, and that made the spheres glow. When she opened the money pouch, shards of ruby, emerald, diamond, and sapphire shone out on her face. She fished out three diamond chips, the smallest denomination. Emeralds were the most valuable, for they could be used by Soulcasters to create food.

The glass part of most spheres was the same size; the size of the gemstone at the center determined the denomination. The three chips, for instance, each had only a tiny splinter of diamond inside. Even that was enough to glow with Stormlight, far fainter than a lamp, but still visible. A mark—the medium denomination of sphere—was a little less bright than a candle, and it took five chips to make a mark.

She'd brought only infused spheres, as she'd heard that dun ones were considered suspect, and sometimes a moneylender would have to be brought in to judge the authenticity of the gemstone. She kept the most valuable spheres she had in her safepouch, of course, which was buttoned to the inside of her left sleeve.

She handed the three chips to Yalb, who cocked his head. She nodded at the porter, blushing, realizing that she'd reflexively used Yalb like a master-servant intermediary. Would he be offended?

He laughed and stood up stiffly, as if imitating a master-servant, paying the porter with a mock stern expression. The porter laughed, bowed to Shallan, then pulled his cart away.

"This is for you," Shallan said, taking out a ruby mark and handing it to Yalb.

"Brightness, this is too much!"

"It's partially out of thanks," she said, "but is also to pay you to stay here and wait for a few hours, in case I return."

"Wait a few hours for a firemark? That's wages for a week's sailing!"

"Then it should be enough to make certain you don't wander off."

"I'll be right here!" Yalb said, giving her an elaborate bow that was surprisingly well-executed.

Shallan took a deep breath and strode up the steps toward the Conclave's imposing entrance. The carved rock really was remarkable—the artist in her wanted to linger and study it, but she didn't dare. Entering the large building was like being swallowed. The hallway inside was lined with Stormlight lamps that shone with white light. Diamond brooms were probably set inside them; most buildings of fine construction used Stormlight to provide illumination. A broam—the highest denomination of sphere—glowed with about the same light as several candles.

Their light shone evenly and softly on the many attendants, scribes, and lighteyes moving through the hallway. The building appeared to be constructed as one broad, high, and long tunnel, burrowed into the rock. Grand chambers lined the sides, and subsidiary corridors branched off the central grand promenade. She felt far more comfortable than she had outdoors. This place—with its bustling servants, its lesser brightlords and brightladies—was familiar.

She raised her freehand in a sign of need, and sure enough, a master-servant in a crisp white shirt and black trousers hurried over to her. "Brightness?" he asked, speaking her native Veden, likely because of the color of her hair.

"I seek Jasnah Kholin," Shallan said. "I have word that she is within these walls."

The master-servant bowed crisply. Most master-servants prided themselves on their refined service—the very same air that Yalb had been mocking moments ago. "I shall return, Brightness." He would be of the second nahn, a darkeyed citizen of very high rank. In Vorin belief, one's Calling—the task to which one dedicated one's life—was of vital importance. Choosing a good profession and working hard at it was the best way

to ensure good placement in the afterlife. The specific devotary that one visited for worship often had to do with the nature of one's chosen Calling.

Shallan folded her arms, waiting. She had thought long about her own Calling. The obvious choice was her art, and she did so love sketching. But it was more than just the drawing that attracted her—it was the *study*, the questions raised by observation. Why weren't the skyeels afraid of people? What did haspers feed on? Why did a rat population thrive in one area, but fail in another? So she'd chosen natural history instead.

She longed to be a true scholar, to receive real instruction, to spend time on deep research and study. Was that part of why she'd suggested this daring plan of seeking out Jasnah and becoming her ward? Perhaps. However, she needed to remain focused. Becoming Jasnah's ward—and therefore student—was only one step.

She considered this as she idly walked up to a pillar, using her freehand to feel the polished stone. Like much of Roshar—save for certain coastal regions—Kharbranth was built on raw, unbroken stone. The buildings outside had been set directly on the rock, and this one sliced into it. The pillar was granite, she guessed, though her geological knowledge was sketchy.

The floor was covered with long, burnt-orange rugs. The material was dense, designed to look rich but bear heavy traffic. The broad, rectangular hallway had an *old* feel to it. One book she'd read claimed that Kharbranth had been founded way back into the shadowdays, years before the Last Desolation. That would make it old indeed. Thousands of years old, created before the terrors of the Hierocracy, long before—even—the Recreance. Back when Voidbringers with bodies of stone were said to have stalked the land.

"Brightness?" a voice asked.

Shallan turned to find that the servant had returned.

"This way, Brightness."

She nodded to the servant, and he led her quickly down the busy hallway. She went over how to present herself to Jasnah. The woman was a legend. Even Shallan—living in the remote estates of Jah Keved—had heard of the Alethi king's brilliant, heretic sister. Jasnah was only thirty-four years old, yet many felt she would already have obtained the cap of a master scholar if it weren't for her vocal denunciations of religion. Most specifically, she denounced the devotaries, the various religious congregations that proper Vorin people joined.

Improper quips would not serve Shallan well here. She would have to be proper. Wardship to a woman of great renown was the best way to be schooled in the feminine arts: music, painting, writing, logic, and science. It was much like how a young man would train in the honor guard of a brightlord he respected.

Shallan had originally written to Jasnah requesting a wardship in desperation; she hadn't actually expected the woman to reply in the affirmative. When she had—via a letter commanding Shallan to attend her in Dumadari in two weeks—Shallan had been shocked. She'd been chasing the woman ever since.

Jasnah was a heretic. Would she demand that Shallan renounce her faith? She doubted she could do such a thing. Vorin teachings regarding one's Glory and Calling had been one of her few refuges during the difficult days, when her father had been at his worst.

They turned into a narrower hallway, entering corridors increasingly far from the main cavern. Finally, the master-servant stopped at a corner and gestured for Shallan to continue. There were voices coming from the corridor to the right.

Shallan hesitated. Sometimes, she wondered how it had come to this. She was the quiet one, the timid one, the youngest of five siblings and the only girl. Sheltered, protected all her life. And now the hopes of her entire house rested on her shoulders.

Their father was dead. And it was vital that remain a secret.

She didn't like to think of that day—she all but blocked it from her mind, and trained herself to think of other things. But the effects of his loss could not be ignored. He had made many promises—some business deals, some bribes, some of the latter disguised as the former. House Davar owed great amounts of money to a great number of people, and without her father to keep them all appeased, the creditors would soon begin making demands.

There was nobody to turn to. Her family, mostly because of her father, was loathed even by its allies. Highprince Valam—the brightlord to whom her family gave fealty—was ailing, and no longer offered them the protection he once had. When it became known that her father was dead and her family bankrupt, that would be the end of House Davar. They'd be consumed and subjugated to another house.

They'd be worked to the bone as punishment—in fact, they might even face assassination by disgruntled creditors. Preventing that depended on Shallan, and the first step came with Jasnah Kholin.

Shallan took a deep breath, then strode around the corner.



"I'm dying, aren't I? Healer, why do you take my blood? Who is that beside you, with his head of lines? I can see a distant sun, dark and cold, shining in a black sky."

—Collected on the 3rd of Jesnan, 1172, 11 seconds pre-death. Subject was a Reshi chull trainer. Sample is of particular note.

Why don't you cry?" the windspren asked. Kaladin sat with his back to the corner of the cage, looking down. The floor planks in front of him were splintered, as if someone had dug at them with nothing but his fingernails. The splintered section was stained dark where the dry grey wood had soaked up blood. A futile, delusional attempt at escape.

The wagon continued to roll. The same routine each day. Wake up sore and aching from a fitful night spent without mattress or blanket. One wagon at a time, the slaves were let out and hobbled with leg irons and given time to shuffle around and relieve themselves. Then they were packed away and given morning slop, and the wagons rolled until afternoon slop. More rolling. Evening slop, then a ladle of water before sleep.

Kaladin's *shash* brand was still cracked and bleeding. At least the cage's top gave shade from the sun.

The windspren shifted to mist, floating like a tiny cloud. She moved in close to Kaladin, the motion outlining her face at the front of the cloud, as if blowing back the fog and revealing something more substantial underneath. Vaporous, feminine, and angular. With such curious eyes. Like no other spren he'd seen.

“The others cry at night,” she said. “But you don’t.”

“Why cry?” he said, leaning his head back against the bars. “What would it change?”

“I don’t know. Why *do* men cry?”

He smiled, closing his eyes. “Ask the Almighty why men cry, little spren. Not me.” His forehead dripped with sweat from the Eastern summer humidity, and it stung as it seeped into his wound. Hopefully, they’d have some weeks of spring again soon. Weather and seasons were unpredictable. You never knew how long they would go on, though typically each would last a few weeks.

The wagon rolled on. After a time, he felt sunlight on his face. He opened his eyes. The sun shone in through the upper side of the cage. Two or three hours past noon, then. What of afternoon slop? Kaladin stood, pulling himself up with one hand on the steel bars. He couldn’t make out Tvlakv driving the wagon up ahead, only flat-faced Bluth behind. The mercenary had on a dirty shirt that laced up the front and wore a wide-brimmed hat against the sun, his spear and cudgel riding on the wagon bench beside him. He didn’t carry a sword—not even Tvlakv did that, not near Alethi land.

The grass continued to part for the wagons, vanishing just in front, then creeping out after the wagons passed. The landscape here was dotted with strange shrubs that Kaladin didn’t recognize. They had thick stalks and stems and spiny green needles. Whenever the wagons grew too close, the needles pulled into the stalks, leaving behind twisted, wormlike trunks with knotted branches. They dotted the hilly landscape, rising from the grass-covered rocks like diminutive sentries.

The wagons just kept on going, well past noon. *Why aren’t we stopping for slop?*

The lead wagon finally pulled to a stop. The other two lurched to a halt behind it, the red-carapaced chulls fidgeted, their antennae waving back and forth. The box-shaped animals had bulging, stony shells and thick, trunklike red legs. From what Kaladin had heard, their claws could snap a man’s arm. But chulls were docile, particularly domesticated ones, and he’d never known anyone in the army to get more than a halfhearted pinch from one.

Bluth and Tag climbed down from their wagons and walked up to meet Tvlakv. The slavemaster stood on his wagon’s seat, shading his eyes against the white sunlight and holding a sheet of paper in his hand. An argument ensued. Tvlakv kept waving in the direction they had been going, then pointing at his sheet of paper.

“Lost, Tvlakv?” Kaladin called. “Perhaps you should pray to the Almighty for guidance. I hear he has a fondness for slavers. Keeps a special room in Damnation just for you.”

To Kaladin's left, one of the slaves—the long-bearded man who had talked to him a few days back—sidled away, not wanting to stand close to a person who was provoking the slaver.

Tvlakv hesitated, then waved curtly to his mercenaries, silencing them. The portly man hopped down from his wagon and walked over to Kaladin. "You," he said. "Deserter. Alethi armies travel these lands for their war. Do you know anything of the area?"

"Let me see the map," Kaladin said. Tvlakv hesitated, then held it up for Kaladin.

Kaladin reached through the bars and snatched the paper. Then, without reading it, Kaladin ripped it in two. In seconds he'd shredded it into a hundred pieces in front of Tvlakv's horrified eyes.

Tvlakv called for the mercenaries, but by the time they arrived, Kaladin had a double handful of confetti to toss out at them. "Happy Middlefest, you bastards," Kaladin said as the flakes of paper fluttered around them. He turned and walked to the other side of the cage and sat down, facing them.

Tvlakv stood, speechless. Then, red-faced, he pointed at Kaladin and hissed something at the mercenaries. Bluth took a step toward the cage, but then thought better of it. He glanced at Tvlakv, then shrugged and walked away. Tvlakv turned to Tag, but the other mercenary just shook his head, saying something soft.

After a few minutes of stewing at the cowardly mercenaries, Tvlakv rounded the cage and approached where Kaladin was sitting. Surprisingly, when he spoke, his voice was calm. "I see you are clever, deserter. You have made yourself invaluable. My other slaves, they aren't from this area, and I have never come this way. You can bargain. What is it you wish in exchange for leading us? I can promise you an extra meal each day, should you please me."

"You want me to lead the caravan?"

"Instructions will be acceptable."

"All right. First, find a cliff."

"That, it will give you a vantage to see the area?"

"No," Kaladin said. "It will give me something to throw you off of."

Tvlakv adjusted his cap in annoyance, brushing back one of his long white eyebrows. "You hate me. That is good. Hatred will keep you strong, make you sell for much. But you will not find vengeance on me unless I have a chance to take you to market. I will not let you escape. But perhaps someone else would. You want to be sold, you see?"

"I don't want vengeance," Kaladin said. The windspren came back—she'd darted off for a time to inspect one of the strange shrubs. She landed in the air and began walking around Tvlakv's face, inspecting him. He didn't seem to be able to see her.

Tvlakv frowned. "No vengeance?"

"It doesn't work," Kaladin said. "I learned that lesson long ago."

"Long ago? You cannot be older than eighteen years, deserter."

It was a good guess. He was nineteen. Had it really only been four years since he'd joined Amaram's army? Kaladin felt as if he'd aged a dozen.

"You are young," Tvlakv continued. "You could escape this fate of yours. Men have been known to live beyond the slave's brand—you could pay off your slave price, you see? Or convince one of your masters to give you your freedom. You could become a free man again. It is not so unlikely."

Kaladin snorted. "I'll never be free of these brands, Tvlakv. You must know that I've tried—and failed—to escape ten times over. It's more than these glyphs on my head that makes your mercenaries wary."

"Past failure does not prove that there is not chance in the future, yes?"

"I'm finished. I don't care." He eyed the slaver. "Besides, you don't actually believe what you're saying. I doubt a man like you would be able to sleep at night if he thought the slaves he sold would be free to seek him out one day."

Tvlakv laughed. "Perhaps, deserter. Perhaps you are right. Or perhaps I simply think that if you *were* to get free, you would hunt down the first man who sold you to slavery, you see? Highlord Amaram, was it not? His death would give me warning so I can run."

How had he known? How had he heard about Amaram? *I'll find him, Kaladin thought. I'll gut him with my own hands. I'll twist his head right off his neck, I'll—*

"Yes," Tvlakv said, studying Kaladin's face, "so you were not so honest when you said you do not thirst for vengeance. I see."

"How do you know about Amaram?" Kaladin said, scowling. "I've changed hands a half-dozen times since then."

"Men talk. Slavers more than most. We must be friends with one another, you see, for nobody else will stomach us."

"Then you know that I didn't get this brand for deserting."

"Ah, but it is what we must pretend, you see? Men guilty of high crimes, they do not sell so well. With that *shash* glyph on your head, it will be difficult enough to get a good price for you. If I cannot sell you, then you . . . well, you will not wish for that status. So we will play a game together. I will say you are a deserter. And you will say nothing. It is an easy game, I think."

"It's illegal."

"We are not in Alethkar," Tvlakv said, "so there is no law. Besides, desertion was the official reason for your sale. Claim otherwise, and you will gain nothing but a reputation for dishonesty."

"Nothing besides a headache for you."

"But you just said you have no desire for vengeance against me."

“I could learn.”

Tvlakv laughed. “Ah, if you have not learned that already, then you probably never will! Besides, did you not threaten to throw me off a cliff? I think you have learned already. But now, we *must* discuss how to proceed. My map has met with an untimely demise, you see.”

Kaladin hesitated, then sighed. “I don’t know,” he said honestly. “I’ve never been this way either.”

Tvlakv frowned. He leaned closer to the cage, inspecting Kaladin, though he still kept his distance. After a moment, Tvlakv shook his head. “I believe you, deserter. A pity. Well, I shall trust my memory. The map was poorly rendered anyway. I am almost glad you ripped it, for I was tempted to do the same myself. If I should happen across any portraits of my former wives, I shall see that they cross your path and take advantage of your unique talents.” He strolled away.

Kaladin watched him go, then cursed to himself.

“What was that for?” the windspren said, walking up to him, head cocked.

“I almost find myself liking him,” Kaladin said, pounding his head back against the cage.

“But . . . after what he did . . .”

Kaladin shrugged. “I didn’t say Tvlakv isn’t a bastard. He’s just a likable bastard.” He hesitated, then grimaced. “Those are the worst kind. When you kill them, you end up feeling guilty for it.”



The wagon leaked during highstorms. That wasn’t surprising; Kaladin suspected that Tvlakv had been driven to slaving by ill fortune. He would rather be trading other goods, but something—lack of funds, a need to leave his previous environs with haste—had forced him to pick up this least reputable of careers.

Men like him couldn’t afford luxury, or even quality. They could barely stay ahead of their debts. In this case, that meant wagons which leaked. The boarded sides were strong enough to withstand highstorm winds, but they weren’t comfortable.

Tvlakv had almost missed getting ready for this highstorm. Apparently, the map Kaladin had torn up had also included a list of highstorm dates purchased from a roving stormwarden. The storms could be predicted mathematically; Kaladin’s father had made a hobby of it. He’d been able to pick the right day eight times out of ten.

The boards rattled against the cage’s bars as wind buffeted the vehicle, shaking it, making it lurch like a clumsy giant’s plaything. The wood groaned and spurts of icy rainwater sprayed through cracks. Flashes of

lightning leaked through as well, accompanied by thunder. That was the only light they got.

Occasionally, light would flash without the thunder. The slaves would groan in terror at this, thinking about the Stormfather, the shades of the Lost Radiants, or the Voidbringers—all of which were said to haunt the most violent highstorms. They huddled together on the far side of the wagon, sharing warmth. Kaladin left them to it, sitting alone with his back to the bars.

Kaladin didn't fear stories of things that walked the storms. In the army, he'd been forced to weather a highstorm or two beneath the lip of a protective stone overhang or other bit of impromptu shelter. Nobody liked to be out during a storm, but sometimes you couldn't avoid it. The things that walked the storms—perhaps even the Stormfather himself—weren't nearly so deadly as the rocks and branches cast up into the air. In fact, the storm's initial tempest of water and wind—the stormwall—was the most dangerous part. The longer one endured after that, the weaker the storm grew, until the trailing edge was nothing more than sprinkling rain.

No, he wasn't worried about Voidbringers looking for flesh to feast upon. He was worried that something would happen to Tvlakv. The slave-master waited out the storm in a cramped wooden enclosure built into the bottom of his wagon. That was ostensibly the safest place in the caravan, but an unlucky twist of fate—a tempest-thrown boulder, the collapse of the wagon—could leave him dead. In that case, Kaladin could see Bluth and Tag running off, leaving everyone in their cages, wooden sides locked up. The slaves would die a slow death by starvation and dehydration, baking under the sun in these boxes.

The storm continued to blow, shaking the wagon. Those winds felt like live things at times. And who was to say they weren't? Were windspren attracted to gusts of wind, or *were* they the gusts of wind? The souls of the force that now wanted so badly to destroy Kaladin's wagon?

That force—sentient or not—failed. The wagons were chained to nearby boulders with their wheels locked. The blasts of wind grew more lethargic. Lightning stopped flashing, and the maddening drumming of rain became a quiet tapping instead. Only once during their journey had a wagon toppled during a highstorm. Both it and the slaves inside had survived with a few dents and bruises.

The wooden side to Kaladin's right shook suddenly, then fell open as Bluth undid its clasps. The mercenary wore his leather coat against the wet, streams of water falling from the brim of his hat as he exposed the bars—and the occupants—to the rain. It was cold, though not as piercingly so as during the height of the storm. It sprayed across Kaladin and the huddled slaves. Tvlakv always ordered the wagons uncovered before the rain stopped; he said it was the only way to wash away the slaves' stink.

Bluth slid the wooden side into place beneath the wagon, then opened the other two sides. Only the wall at the front of the wagon—just behind the driver’s seat—couldn’t be brought down.

“Little early to be taking down the sides, Bluth,” Kaladin said. It wasn’t quite the riddens yet—the period near the end of a highstorm when the rain sprinkled softly. This rain was still heavy, the wind still gusting on occasion.

“The master wants you plenty clean today.”

“Why?” Kaladin asked, rising, water streaming from his ragged brown clothing.

Bluth ignored him. *Perhaps we’re nearing our destination*, Kaladin thought as he scanned the landscape.

Over the last few days, the hills had given way to uneven rock formations—places where weathering winds had left behind crumbling cliffs and jagged shapes. Grass grew up the rocky sides that saw the most sun, and other plants were plentiful in the shade. The time right after a highstorm was when the land was most alive. Rockbud polyps split and sent out their vines. Other kinds of vine crept from crevices, licking up water. Leaves unfolded from shrubs and trees. Cremlings of all kinds slithered through puddles, enjoying the banquet. Insects buzzed into the air; larger crustaceans—crabs and leggers—left their hiding places. The very rocks seemed to come to life.

Kaladin noted a half-dozen windspren flitting overhead, their translucent forms chasing after—or perhaps cruising along with—the highstorm’s last gusts. Tiny lights rose around the plants. Lifespren. They looked like motes of glowing green dust or swarms of tiny translucent insects.

A legger—its hairlike spines lifted to the air to give warning of changes in the wind—climbed along the side of the cart, its long body lined with dozens of pairs of legs. That was familiar enough, but he’d never seen a legger with such a deep purple carapace. Where was Tvlakv taking the caravan? Those uncultivated hillsides were perfect for farming. You could spread stumpweight sap on them—mixed with lavis seeds—during seasons of weaker storms following the Weeping. In four months, you’d have polyps larger than a man’s head growing all along the hill, ready to break open for the grain inside.

The chulls lumbered about, feasting on rockbuds, slugs, and smaller crustaceans that had appeared after the storm. Tag and Bluth quietly hitched the beasts to their harnesses as a grumpy-looking Tvlakv crawled out of his waterproof refuge. The slavemaster pulled on a cap and deep black cloak against the rain. He rarely came out until the storm had passed completely; he was *very* eager to get to their destination. Were they that close to the coast? That was one of the only places where they’d find cities in the Unclaimed Hills.

Within minutes, the wagons were rolling again across the uneven ground. Kaladin settled back as the sky cleared, the highstorm a smudge of blackness on the western horizon. The sun brought welcome warmth, and the slaves basked in the light, streams of water dripping from their clothing and running out the back of the rocking wagon.

Presently, a translucent ribbon of light zipped up to Kaladin. He was coming to take the windspren's presence for granted. She had gone out during the storm, but she'd come back. As always.

"I saw others of your kind," Kaladin said idly.

"Others?" she asked, taking the form of a young woman. She began to step around him in the air, spinning occasionally, dancing to some unheard beat.

"Windspren," Kaladin said. "Chasing after the storm. Are you certain you don't want to go with them?"

She glanced westward, longingly. "No," she finally said, continuing her dance. "I like it here."

Kaladin shrugged. She'd ceased playing as many pranks as she once had, and so he'd stopped letting her presence annoy him.

"There are others near," she said. "Others like you."

"Slaves?"

"I don't know. People. Not the ones here. Other ones."

"Where?"

She turned a translucent white finger, pointing eastward. "There. Many of them. Lots and lots."

Kaladin stood up. He couldn't imagine that a spren had a good handle on how to measure distance and numbers. *Yes . . .* Kaladin squinted, studying the horizon. *That's smoke. From chimneys?* He caught a gust of it on the wind; if not for the rain, he'd probably have smelled it sooner.

Should he care? It didn't matter where he was a slave; he'd still be a slave. He'd accepted this life. That was his way now. Don't care, don't bother.

Still, he watched with curiosity as his wagon climbed the side of a hill and gave the slaves inside a good vantage of what was ahead. It wasn't a city. It was something grander, something larger. An enormous army encampment.

"Great Father of Storms . . ." Kaladin whispered.

Ten masses of troops bivouacked in familiar Alethi patterns—circular, by company rank, with camp followers on the outskirts, mercenaries in a ring just inside them, citizen soldiers near the middle, lighteyed officers at the very center. They were camped in a series of enormous craterlike rock formations, only the sides were more irregular, more jagged. Like broken eggshells.

Kaladin had left an army much like this eight months ago, though Amaram's force had been much smaller. This one covered miles of stone,

stretching far both north and south. A thousand banners bearing a thousand different family glyphs flapped proudly in the air. There were some tents—mainly on the outside of the armies—but most of the troops were housed in large stone barracks. That meant Soulcasters.

That encampment directly ahead of them flew a banner Kaladin had seen in books. Deep blue with white glyphs—*kbokb* and *linil*, stylized and painted as a sword standing before a crown. House Kholin. The king's house.

Daunted, Kaladin looked beyond the armies. The landscape to the east was as he'd heard it described in a dozen different stories detailing the king's campaign against the Parshendi betrayers. It was an enormous riven plain of rock—so wide he couldn't see the other side—that was split and cut by sheer chasms, crevasses twenty or thirty feet wide. They were so deep that they disappeared into darkness and formed a jagged mosaic of uneven plateaus. Some large, others tiny. The expansive plain looked like a platter that had been broken, its pieces then reassembled with small gaps between the fragments.

"The Shattered Plains," Kaladin whispered.

"What?" the windspren asked. "What's wrong?"

Kaladin shook his head, bemused. "I spent years trying to get to this place. It's what Tien wanted, in the end at least. To come here, fight in the king's army . . ."

And now Kaladin was here. Finally. *Accidentally*. He felt like laughing at the absurdity. *I should have realized*, he thought. *I should have known. We weren't ever heading toward the coast and its cities. We were heading here. To war.*

This place would be subject to Alethi law and rules. He'd expected that Tvlakv would want to avoid such things. But here, he'd probably also find the best prices.

"The Shattered Plains?" one of the slaves said. "Really?"

Others crowded around, peering out. In their sudden excitement, they seemed to forget their fear of Kaladin.

"It *is* the Shattered Plains!" another man said. "That's the king's army!"

"Perhaps we'll find justice here," another said.

"I hear the king's household servants live as well as the finest merchants," said another. "His slaves have to be better off too. We'll be in Vorin lands; we'll even make wages!"

That much was true. When worked, slaves had to be paid a small wage—half what a nonslave would be paid, which was already often less than a full citizen would make for the same work. But it was something, and Alethi law required it. Only ardents—who couldn't own anything anyway—didn't have to be paid. Well, them and parshmen. But parshmen were more animal than anything else.

A slave could apply his earnings to his slave debt and, after years of labor, earn his freedom. Theoretically. The others continued to chatter as the wagons rolled down the incline, but Kaladin withdrew to the back of the wagon. He suspected that the option to pay off a slave's price was a sham, intended to keep slaves docile. The debt was enormous, far more than a slave sold for, and virtually impossible to earn out.

Under previous masters, he'd demanded his wages be given to him. They had always found ways to cheat him—charging him for his housing, his food. That's how lighteyes were. Roshone, Amaram, Katarotam . . . Each lighteye Kaladin had known, whether as a slave or a free man, had shown himself to be corrupt to the core, for all his outward poise and beauty. They were like rotting corpses clothed in beautiful silk.

The other slaves kept talking about the king's army, and about justice. *Justice?* Kaladin thought, resting back against the bars. *I'm not convinced there is such a thing as justice.* Still, he found himself wondering. That was the king's army—the armies of all ten highprinces—come to fulfill the Vengeance Pact.

If there was one thing he still let himself long for, it was the chance to hold a spear. To fight again, to try and find his way back to the man he had been. A man who had cared.

If he would find that anywhere, he'd find it here.



"I have seen the end, and have heard it named. The Night of Sorrows, the True Desolation. The Everstorm."

—Collected on the 1st of Nanes, 1172, 15 seconds pre-death. Subject was a darkeyed youth of unknown origin.

Shallan had not expected Jasnah Kholin to be so beautiful. It was a stately, mature beauty—as one might find in the portrait of some historical scholar. Shallan realized that she'd naively been expecting Jasnah to be an ugly spinster, like the stern matrons who had tutored her years ago. How else could one picture a heretic well into her mid-thirties and still unmarried?

Jasnah was nothing like that. She was tall and slender, with clear skin, narrow black eyebrows, and thick, deep onyx hair. She wore part of it up, wrapped around a small, scroll-shaped golden ornament with two long hairpins holding it in place. The rest tumbled down behind her neck in small, tight curls. Even twisted and curled as it was, it came down to Jasnah's shoulders—if left unbound, it would be as long as Shallan's hair, reaching past the middle of her back.

She had a squarish face and discriminating pale violet eyes. She was listening to a man dressed in robes of burnt orange and white, the Kharbranthian royal colors. Brightness Kholin was several fingers taller than the man—apparently, the Alethi reputation for height was no exaggeration. Jasnah glanced at Shallan, noting her, then returned to her conversation.

Stormfather! This woman *was* the sister of a king. Reserved, statuesque,

dressed immaculately in blue and silver. Like Shallan's dress, Jasnah's buttoned up the sides and had a high collar, though Jasnah had a much fuller chest than Shallan. The skirts were loose below the waist, falling generously to the floor. Her sleeves were long and stately, and the left one was buttoned up to hide her safehand.

On her freehand was a distinctive piece of jewelry: two rings and a bracelet connected by several chains, holding a triangular group of gemstones across the back of the hand. A Soulcaster—the word was used for both the people who performed the process and the fabrial that made it possible.

Shallan edged into the room, trying to get a better look at the large, glowing gemstones. Her heart began to beat a little faster. The Soulcaster looked identical to the one she and her brothers had found in the inside pocket of her father's coat.

Jasnah and the man in robes began walking in Shallan's direction, still talking. How would Jasnah react, now that her ward had finally caught up to her? Would she be angry because of Shallan's tardiness? Shallan couldn't be blamed for that, but people often expect irrational things from their inferiors.

Like the grand cavern outside, this hallway was cut from the rock, but it was more richly furbished, with ornate hanging chandeliers made with Stormlit gemstones. Most were deep violet garnets, which were among the less valuable stones. Even so, the sheer number hanging there glistening with violet light would make the chandelier worth a small fortune. More than that, however, Shallan was impressed with the symmetry of the design and the beauty of the pattern of crystals hanging at the sides of the chandelier.

As Jasnah grew near, Shallan could hear some of what she was saying.

“. . . realize that this action might prompt an unfavorable reaction from the devotaries?" the woman said, speaking in Alethi. It was very near to Shallan's native Veden, and she'd been taught to speak it well during her childhood.

"Yes, Brightness," said the robed man. He was elderly, with a wispy white beard, and had pale grey eyes. His open, kindly face seemed very concerned, and he wore a squat, cylindrical hat that matched the orange and white of his robes. Rich robes. Was this some kind of royal steward, perhaps?

No. Those gemstones on his fingers, the way he carried himself, the way other lighteyed attendants deferred to him . . . *Stormfather!* Shallan thought. *This has to be the king himself!* Not Jasnah's brother, Elhokar, but the king of Kharbranth. Taravangian.

Shallan hastily performed an appropriate curtsy, which Jasnah noted.

"The ardents have much sway here, Your Majesty," Jasnah said with a smooth voice.

"As do I," the king said. "You needn't worry about me."

“Very well,” Jasnah said. “Your terms are agreeable. Lead me to the location, and I shall see what can be done. If you will excuse me as we walk, however, I have someone to attend to.” Jasnah made a curt motion toward Shallan, waving her to join them.

“Of course, Brightness,” the king said. He seemed to defer to Jasnah. Kharbranth was a very small kingdom—just a single city—while Alethkar was one of the world’s most powerful. An Alethi princess might well outrank a Kharbranthian king in real terms, however protocol would have it.

Shallan hurried to catch up to Jasnah, who walked a little behind the king as he began to speak to his attendants. “Brightness,” Shallan said. “I am Shallan Davar, whom you asked to meet you. I deeply regret not being able to get to you in Dumadari.”

“The fault was not yours,” Jasnah said with a wave of the fingers. “I didn’t expect that you would make it in time. I wasn’t certain where I would be going after Dumadari when I sent you that note, however.”

Jasnah wasn’t angry; that was a good sign. Shallan felt some of her anxiety recede.

“I am impressed by your tenacity, child,” Jasnah continued. “I honestly didn’t expect you to follow me this far. After Kharbranth, I was going to forgo leaving you notes, as I’d presumed that you’d have given up. Most do so after the first few steps.”

Most? Then it was a *test* of some sort? And Shallan had passed?

“Yes indeed,” Jasnah continued, voice musing. “Perhaps I will actually allow you to petition me for a place as my ward.”

Shallan almost stumbled in shock. *Petition* her? Wasn’t that what she’d already done? “Brightness,” Shallan said, “I thought that . . . Well, your letter . . .”

Jasnah eyed her. “I gave you leave to *meet* me, Miss Davar. I did not promise to take you on. The training and care of a ward is a distraction for which I have little tolerance or time at the present. But you have traveled far. I will entertain your request, though understand that my requirements are strict.”

Shallan covered a grimace.

“No tantrum,” Jasnah noted. “That is a good sign.”

“Tantrum, Brightness? From a lighteyed woman?”

“You’d be surprised,” Jasnah said dryly. “But attitude alone will not earn your place. Tell me, how extensive is your education?”

“Extensive in some areas,” Shallan said. Then she hesitantly added, “Extensively lacking in others.”

“Very well,” Jasnah said. Ahead, the king seemed to be in a hurry, but he was old enough that even an urgent walk was still slow. “Then we shall do an evaluation. Answer truthfully and do not exaggerate, as I will soon

discover your lies. Feign no false modesty, either. I haven't the patience for a simperer."

"Yes, Brightness."

"We shall begin with music. How would you judge your skill?"

"I have a good ear, Brightness," Shallan said honestly. "I'm best with voice, though I have been trained on the zither and the pipes. I would be far from the best you'd heard, but I'd also be far from the worst. I know most historical ballads by heart."

"Give me the refrain from 'Lilting Adrene.'"

"Here?"

"I'm not fond of repeating myself, child."

Shallan blushed, but began to sing. It wasn't her finest performance, but her tone was pure and she didn't stumble over any of the words.

"Good," Jasnah said as Shallan paused for a breath. "Languages?"

Shallan fumbled for a moment, bringing her attention away from frantically trying to remember the next verse. Languages? "I can speak your native Alethi, obviously," Shallan said. "I have a passable reading knowledge of Thaylen and good spoken Azish. I can make myself understood in Selay, but not read it."

Jasnah made no comment either way. Shallan began to grow nervous.

"Writing?" Jasnah asked.

"I know all of the major, minor, and topical glyphs and can paint them calligraphically."

"So can most children."

"The glyphwards that I paint are regarded by those who know me as quite impressive."

"Glyphwards?" Jasnah said. "I had reason to believe you wanted to be a scholar, not a purveyor of superstitious nonsense."

"I have kept a journal since I was a child," Shallan continued, "in order to practice my writing skills."

"Congratulations," Jasnah said. "Should I need someone to write a treatise on their stuffed pony or give an account of an interesting pebble they discovered, I shall send for you. Is there nothing you can offer that shows you have true skill?"

Shallan blushed. "With all due respect, Brightness, you have a letter from me yourself, and it was persuasive enough to make you grant me this audience."

"A valid point," Jasnah said, nodding. "It took you long enough to make it. How is your training in logic and its related arts?"

"I am accomplished in basic mathematics," Shallan said, still flustered, "and I often helped with minor accounts for my father. I have read through

the complete works of Tormas, Nashan, Niali the Just, and—of course—Nohadon.”

“Placini?”

Who? “No.”

“Gabrathin, Yustara, Manaline, Syasikk, Shauka-daughter-Hasweth?”

Shallan cringed and shook her head again. That last name was obviously Shin. Did the Shin people even *have* logicmasters? Did Jasnah really expect her wards to have studied such obscure texts?

“I see,” Jasnah said. “Well, what of history?”

History. Shallan shrank down even further. “I . . . This is one of the areas where I’m obviously deficient, Brightness. My father was never able to find a suitable tutor for me. I read the history books he owned. . . .”

“Which were?”

“The entire set of Barlesha Lhan’s *Topics*, mostly.”

Jasnah waved her freehand dismissively. “Barely worth the time spent scribing them. A popular survey of historical events at best.”

“I apologize, Brightness.”

“This is an embarrassing hole. History is *the* most important of the literary subarts. One would think that your parents would have taken specific care in this area, if they’d hoped to submit you to study under a historian like myself.”

“My circumstances are unusual, Brightness.”

“Ignorance is hardly unusual, Miss Davar. The longer I live, the more I come to realize that it is the natural state of the human mind. There are many who will strive to defend its sanctity and then expect you to be impressed with their efforts.”

Shallan blushed again. She’d realized she had some deficiencies, but Jasnah had unreasonable expectations. She said nothing, continuing to walk beside the taller woman. How long was this hallway, anyway? She was so flustered she didn’t even look at the paintings they passed. They turned a corner, walking deeper into the mountainside.

“Well, let us move on to science, then,” Jasnah said, tone displeased. “What can you say of yourself there?”

“I have the reasonable foundation in the sciences you might expect of a young woman my age,” Shallan said, more stiffly than she would have liked.

“Which means?”

“I can speak with skill about geography, geology, physics, and chemistry. I’ve made particular study of biology and botany, as I was able to pursue them with a reasonable level of independence on my father’s estates. But if you expect me to be able to solve Fabrisan’s Conundrum with a wave of my hand, I suspect you shall be disappointed.”

“Have I not a right to make reasonable demands of my potential students, Miss Davar?”

“Reasonable? Your demands are about as *reasonable* as the ones made of the Ten Heralds on Proving Day! With all due respect, Brightness, you seem to want potential wards to be master scholars already. I may be able to find a pair of eighty-year-old ardents in the city who *might* fit your requirements. They could interview for the position, though they may have trouble hearing well enough to answer your questions.”

“I see,” Jasnah replied. “And do you speak with such pique to your parents as well?”

Shallan winced. Her time spent with the sailors had loosened her tongue far too much. Had she traveled all this way only to offend Jasnah? She thought of her brothers, destitute, keeping up a tenuous façade back home. Would she have to return to them in defeat, having squandered this opportunity? “I did not speak to them this way, Brightness. Nor should I to you. I apologize.”

“Well, at least you are humble enough to admit fault. Still, I am disappointed. How is it that your mother considered you ready for a wardship?”

“My mother passed away when I was just a child, Brightness.”

“And your father soon remarried. Malise Gevelmar, I believe.”

Shallan started at her knowledge. House Davar was ancient, but only of middling power and importance. The fact that Jasnah knew the name of Shallan’s stepmother said a lot about her. “My stepmother passed away recently. She didn’t send me to be your ward. I took this initiative upon myself.”

“My condolences,” Jasnah said. “Perhaps you should be with your father, seeing to his estates and comforting him, rather than wasting my time.”

The men walking ahead turned down another side passage. Jasnah and Shallan followed, entering a smaller corridor with an ornate red and yellow rug, mirrors hanging on the walls.

Shallan turned to Jasnah. “My father has no need of me.” Well, that was true. “But I have great need of you, as this interview itself has proven. If ignorance galls you so much, can you in good conscience pass up the opportunity to rid me of mine?”

“I’ve done so before, Miss Davar. You are the twelfth young woman to ask me for a wardship this year.”

Twelve? Shallan thought. *In one year?* And she’d assumed that women would stay away from Jasnah because of her antagonism toward the devotaries.

The group reached the end of the narrow hallway, turning a corner to find—to Shallan’s surprise—a place where a large chunk of rock had fallen

from the ceiling. A dozen or so attendants stood here, some looking anxious. What was going on?

Much of the rubble had evidently been cleared away, though the gouge in the ceiling gaped ominously. It didn't look out on the sky; they had been progressing downward, and were probably far underground. A massive stone, taller than a man, had fallen into a doorway on the left. There was no getting past it into the room beyond. Shallan thought she heard sounds on the other side. The king stepped up to the stone, speaking in a comforting voice. He pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his aged brow.

"The dangers of living in a building cut directly into the rock," Jasnah said, striding forward. "When did this happen?" Apparently she hadn't been summoned to the city specifically for this purpose; the king was simply taking advantage of her presence.

"During the recent highstorm, Brightness," the king said. He shook his head, making his drooping, thin white mustache tremble. "The palace architects might be able to cut a way into the room, but it would take time, and the next highstorm is scheduled to hit in just a few days. Beyond that, breaking in might bring down more of the ceiling."

"I thought Kharbranth was protected from the highstorms, Your Majesty," Shallan said, causing Jasnah to shoot her a glance.

"The city is sheltered, young woman," the king said. "But the stone mountain behind us is buffeted quite strongly. Sometimes it causes avalanches on that side, and that can cause the entire mountainside to shake." He glanced at the ceiling. "Cave-ins are very rare, and we thought this area was quite safe, but . . ."

"But it is rock," Jasnah said, "and there is no telling if a weak vein lurks just beyond the surface." She inspected the monolith that had fallen from the ceiling. "This will be difficult. I will probably lose a very valuable focal stone."

"I—" the king began, wiping his brow again. "If only we had a Shardblade—"

Jasnah cut him off with a wave of the hand. "I was not seeking to renegotiate our bargain, Your Majesty. Access to the Palanaeum is worth the cost. You will want to send someone for wet rags. Have the majority of the servants move down to the other end of the hallway. You may wish to wait there yourself."

"I will stay here," the king said, causing his attendants to object, including a large man wearing a black leather cuirass, probably his bodyguard. The king silenced them by raising his wrinkled hand. "I will not hide like a coward when my granddaughter is trapped."

No wonder he was so anxious. Jasnah didn't argue further, and Shallan

could see from her eyes that it was of no consequence to her if the king risked his life. The same apparently went for Shallan, for Jasnah didn't order her away. Servants approached with wetted cloths and distributed them. Jasnah refused hers. The king and his bodyguard raised theirs to their faces, covering mouth and nose.

Shallan took hers. What was the point of it? A couple of servants passed some wet cloths through a space between the rock and the wall to those inside. Then all of the servants rushed away down the hallway.

Jasnah picked and prodded at the boulder. "Miss Davar," she said, "what method would you use to ascertain the mass of this stone?"

Shallan blinked. "Well, I suppose I'd ask His Majesty. His architects probably calculated it."

Jasnah cocked her head. "An elegant response. Did they do that, Your Majesty?"

"Yes, Brightness Kholin," the king said. "It's roughly fifteen thousand kavals."

Jasnah eyed Shallan. "A point in your favor, Miss Davar. A scholar knows not to waste time rediscovering information already known. It's a lesson I sometimes forget."

Shallan felt herself swell at the words. She already had an inkling that Jasnah did not give such praise lightly. Did this mean that the woman was still considering her as a ward?

Jasnah held up her freehand, Soulcaster glistening against the skin. Shallan felt her heartbeat speed up. She'd never seen Soulcasting done in person. The ardens were very secretive in using their fabrials, and she hadn't even known that her father had one until they'd found it on him. Of course, his no longer worked. That was one of the main reasons she was here.

The gemstones set into Jasnah's Soulcaster were enormous, some of the largest that Shallan had ever seen, worth many spheres each. One was smokestone, a pure glassy black gemstone. The second was a diamond. The third was a ruby. All three were cut—a cut stone could hold more Stormlight—into glistening, many-faceted oval shapes.

Jasnah closed her eyes, pressing her hand against the fallen boulder. She raised her head, inhaling slowly. The stones on the back of her hand began to glow more fiercely, the smokestone in particular growing so bright it was difficult to look at.

Shallan held her breath. The only thing she dared do was blink, committing the scene to memory. For a long, extended moment, nothing happened.

And then, briefly, Shallan heard a sound. A low thrumming, like a distant group of voices, humming together a single, pure note.

Jasnah's hand *sank* into the rock.

The stone vanished.

A burst of dense black smoke exploded into the hallway. Enough to blind Shallan; it seemed the output of a thousand fires, and smelled of burned wood. Shallan hastily raised the wet rag to her face, dropping to her knees. Oddly, her ears felt stopped up, as if she'd climbed down from a great height. She had to swallow to pop them.

She shut her eyes tightly as they began to water, and she held her breath. Her ears filled with a rushing sound.

It passed. She blinked open her eyes to find the king and his bodyguard huddled against the wall beside her. Smoke still pooled at the ceiling; the hallway smelled strongly of it. Jasnah stood, eyes still closed, oblivious of the smoke—though grime now dusted her face and clothing. It had left marks on the walls too.

Shallan had read of this, but she was still in awe. Jasnah had transformed the boulder into smoke, and since smoke was far less dense than stone, the change had pushed the smoke away in an explosive outburst.

It was true; Jasnah really *did* have a functioning Soulcaster. And a powerful one too. Nine out of ten Soulcasters were capable of a few limited transformations: creating water or grain from stone; forming bland, single-roomed rock buildings out of air or cloth. A greater one, like Jasnah's, could effectuate any transformation. Literally turn any substance into any other one. How it must grate on the ardentists that such a powerful, holy relic was in the hands of someone outside the ardentia. And a heretic no less!

Shallan stumbled to her feet, leaving the cloth at her mouth, breathing humid but dust-free air. She swallowed, her ears popping again as the hall's pressure returned to normal. A moment later, the king rushed into the now-accessible room. A small girl—along with several nursemaids and other palace servants—sat on the other side, coughing. The king pulled the girl into his arms. She was too young to have a modesty sleeve.

Jasnah opened her eyes, blinking, as if momentarily confused by her location. She took a deep breath, and didn't cough. Indeed, she actually *smiled*, as if enjoying the scent of the smoke.

Jasnah turned to Shallan, focusing on her. "You are still waiting for a response. I'm afraid you will not like what I say."

"But you haven't finished your testing of me yet," Shallan said, forcing herself to be bold. "Surely you won't give judgment until you have."

"I haven't finished?" Jasnah asked, frowning.

"You didn't ask me about all of the feminine arts. You left out painting and drawing."

"I have never had much use for them."

"But *they* are of the arts," Shallan said, feeling desperate. This was where she was most accomplished! "Many consider the visual arts the most refined of them all. I brought my portfolio. I would show you what I can do."

Jasnah pursed her lips. “The visual arts are frivolity. I have weighed the facts, child, and I cannot accept you. I’m sorry.”

Shallan’s heart sank.

“Your Majesty,” Jasnah said to the king, “I would like to go to the Palanaeum.”

“Now?” the king said, cradling his granddaughter. “But we are going to have a feast—”

“I appreciate the offer,” Jasnah said, “but I find myself with an abundance of everything *but* time.”

“Of course,” the king said. “I will take you personally. Thank you for what you’ve done. When I heard that you had requested entrance . . .” He continued to babble at Jasnah, who followed him wordlessly down the hallway, leaving Shallan behind.

She clutched her satchel to her chest, lowering the cloth from her mouth. Six months of chasing, for this. She gripped the rag in frustration, squeezing sooty water between her fingers. She wanted to cry. That was what she probably would have done if she’d been that same child she had been six months ago.

But things had changed. *She* had changed. If she failed, House Davar would fall. Shallan felt her determination redouble, though she wasn’t able to stop a few tears of frustration from squeezing out of the corners of her eyes. She was not going to give up until Jasnah was forced to truss her up in chains and have the authorities drag her away.

Her step surprisingly firm, she walked in the direction Jasnah had gone. Six months ago, she had explained a desperate plan to her brothers. She would apprentice herself to Jasnah Kholin, scholar, heretic. Not for the education. Not for the prestige. But in order to learn where she kept her Soulcaster.

And then Shallan would steal it.





Charcoal rubbing of a map of Sadeas's warcamp as used by a common spearman. It was scratched on the back of a palm-sized cremling shell. Rubbing labeled in ink by an anonymous Alethi scholar, circa 1173.



*"I'm cold. Mother, I'm cold. Mother? Why can I still hear the rain?
Will it stop?"*

—Collected on Vevishes, 1172, 32 seconds pre-death. Subject was a light-eyed female child, approximately six years old.

Tvlakv released all of the slaves from their cages at once. This time, he didn't fear runaways or a slave rebellion—not with nothing but wilderness behind them and over a hundred thousand armed soldiers just ahead.

Kaladin stepped down from the wagon. They were inside one of the craterlike formations, its jagged stone wall rising just to the east. The ground had been cleared of plant life, and the rock was slick beneath his unshod feet. Pools of rainwater had gathered in depressions. The air was crisp and clean, and the sun strong overhead, though with this Eastern humidity, he always felt damp.

Around them spread the signs of an army long settled; this war had been going on since the old king's death, nearly six years ago. Everyone told stories of that night, the night when Parshendi tribesmen had murdered King Gavilar.

Squads of soldiers marched by, following directions indicated by painted circles at each intersection. The camp was packed with long stone bunkers, and there were more tents than Kaladin had discerned from above. Soulcasters couldn't be used to create every shelter. After the stink of the slave caravan, the place smelled good, brimming with familiar scents like treated leather and oiled weapons. However, many of the soldiers had a disorderly

look. They weren't dirty, but they didn't seem particularly disciplined either. They roamed the camp in packs with coats undone. Some pointed and jeered at the slaves. This was the army of a highprince? The elite force that fought for Alethkar's honor? This was what Kaladin had aspired to join?

Bluth and Tag watched carefully as Kaladin lined up with the other slaves, but he didn't try anything. Now was not the time to provoke them—Kaladin had seen how mercenaries acted when around commissioned troops. Bluth and Tag played their part, walking with their chests out and hands on their weapons. They shoved a few of the slaves into place, ramming a cudgel into one man's belly and cursing him gruffly.

They stayed clear of Kaladin.

"The king's army," said the slave next to him. It was the dark-skinned man who had talked to Kaladin about escaping. "I thought we were meant for mine work. Why, this won't be so bad at all. We'll be cleaning latrines or maintaining roads."

Odd, to look forward to latrine work or labor in the hot sun. Kaladin hoped for something else. Hoped. Yes, he'd discovered that he could still hope. A spear in his hands. An enemy to face. He could live like that.

Tvlakv spoke with an important-looking lighteyed woman. She wore her dark hair up in a complex weave, sparkling with infused amethysts, and her dress was a deep crimson. She looked much as Lalar had, at the end. She was probably of the fourth or fifth dahn, wife and scribe to one of the camp's officers.

Tvlakv began to brag about his wares, but the woman raised a delicate hand. "I can see what I am purchasing, slaver," she said in a smooth, aristocratic accent. "I will inspect them myself."

She began to walk down the line, accompanied by several soldiers. Her dress was cut in the Alethi noble fashion—a solid swath of silk, tight and formfitting through the top with sleek skirts below. It buttoned up the sides of the torso from waist to neck, where it was topped by a small, gold-embroidered collar. The longer left cuff hid her safehand. Kaladin's mother had always just worn a glove, which seemed far more practical to him.

Judging by her face, she was not particularly impressed with what she saw. "These men are half-starved and sickly," she said, taking a thin rod from a young female attendant. She used it to lift the hair from one man's forehead, inspecting his brand. "You are asking two emerald brooms a head?"

Tvlakv began to sweat. "Perhaps one and a half?"

"And what would I use them for? I wouldn't trust men this filthy near food, and we have parshmen to do most other work."

"If Your Ladyship is not pleased, I could approach other highprinces. . . ."

"No," she said, smacking the slave she'd been regarding as he shied

away from her. "One and a quarter. They can help cut timber for us in the northern forests. . . ." She trailed off as she noticed Kaladin. "Here now. This is far better stock than the others."

"I thought that you might like this one," Tvlakv said, stepping up to her. "He *is* quite—"

She raised the rod and silenced Tvlakv. She had a small sore on one lip. Some ground cussweed root could help with that.

"Remove your top, slave," she commanded.

Kaladin stared her right in her blue eyes and felt an almost irresistible urge to spit at her. No. No, he couldn't afford that. Not when there was a chance. He pulled his arms out of the sacklike clothing, letting it fall to his waist, exposing his chest.

Despite eight months as a slave, he was far better muscled than the others. "A large number of scars for one so young," the noblewoman said thoughtfully. "You are a military man?"

"Yes." His windspren zipped up to the woman, inspecting her face.

"Mercenary?"

"Amaram's army," Kaladin said. "A citizen, second nahn."

"*Once* a citizen," Tvlakv put in quickly. "He was—"

She silenced Tvlakv again with her rod, glaring at him. Then she used the rod to push aside Kaladin's hair and inspect his forehead.

"*Shash* glyph," she said, clicking her tongue. Several of the soldiers nearby stepped closer, hands on their swords. "Where I come from, slaves who deserve these are simply executed."

"They are fortunate," Kaladin said.

"And how did you end up here?"

"I killed someone," Kaladin said, preparing his lies carefully. *Please*, he thought to the Heralds. *Please*. It had been a long time since he had prayed for anything.

The woman raised an eyebrow.

"I'm a murderer, Brightness," Kaladin said. "Got drunk, made some mistakes. But I can use a spear as well as any man. Put me in your bright-lord's army. Let me fight again." It was a strange lie to make, but the woman would never let Kaladin fight if she thought he was a deserter. In this case, better to be known as an accidental murderer.

Please. . . he thought. To be a soldier again. It seemed, in one moment, the most glorious thing he could ever have wanted. How much better it would be to die on the battlefield than waste away emptying chamber pots.

To the side, Tvlakv stepped up beside the lighteyed woman. He glanced at Kaladin, then sighed. "He's a deserter, Brightness. Don't listen to him."

No! Kaladin felt a blazing burst of anger consume his hope. He raised hands toward Tvlakv. He'd strangle the rat, and—

Something cracked him across the back. He grunted, stumbling and falling to one knee. The noblewoman stepped back, raising her safehand to her breast in alarm. One of the army soldiers grabbed Kaladin and towed him back to his feet.

“Well,” she finally said. “That is unfortunate.”

“I *can* fight,” Kaladin growled against the pain. “Give me a spear. Let me—”

She raised her rod, cutting him off.

“Brightness,” Tvlakv said, not meeting Kaladin’s eyes. “I would not trust him with a weapon. It is true that he is a murderer, but he is also known to disobey and lead rebellions against his masters. I couldn’t sell him to you as a bonded soldier. My conscience, it would not allow it.” He hesitated. “The men in his wagon, he might have corrupted them all with talk of escape. My honor demands that I tell you this.”

Kaladin gritted his teeth. He was tempted to try to take down the soldier behind him, grab that spear and spend his last moments ramming it through Tvlakv’s portly gut. Why? What did it matter to Tvlakv how Kaladin was treated by this army?

I should never have ripped up the map, Kaladin thought. *Bitterness is repaid more often than kindness.* One of his father’s sayings.

The woman nodded, moving on. “Show me which ones,” she said. “I’ll still take them, because of your honesty. We need some new bridgemen.”

Tvlakv nodded eagerly. Before moving on, he paused and leaned in to Kaladin. “I cannot trust that you will behave. The people in this army, they will blame a merchant for not revealing all he knew. I . . . am sorry.” With that, the merchant scuttled away.

Kaladin growled in the back of his throat, and then pulled himself free of the soldiers, but remained in line. So be it. Cutting down trees, building bridges, fighting in the army. None of it mattered. He would just keep living. They’d taken his freedom, his family, his friends, and—most dear of all—his dreams. They could do nothing more to him.

After her inspection, the noblewoman took a writing board from her assistant and made a few quick notations on its paper. Tvlakv gave her a ledger detailing how much each slave had paid down on their slave debt. Kaladin caught a glimpse; it said that not a single one of the men had paid anything. Perhaps Tvlakv lied about the figures. Not unlikely.

Kaladin would probably just let all of his wages go to his debt this time. Let them squirm as they saw him actually call their bluff. What would they do if he got close to earning out his debt? He’d probably never find out—depending on what these bridgemen earned, it could take anything from ten to fifty years to get there.

98 The lighteyed woman assigned most of the slaves to forest duty. A half-

dozen of the more spindly ones were sent to work the mess halls, despite what she'd said before. "Those ten," the noblewoman said, raising her rod to point at Kaladin and the others from his wagon. "Take them to the bridge crews. Tell Lamaril and Gaz that the tall one is to be given special treatment."

The soldiers laughed, and one began shoving Kaladin's group along the pathway. Kaladin endured it; these men had no reason to be gentle, and he wouldn't give them a reason to be rougher. If there was a group citizen soldiers hated more than mercenaries, it was deserters.

As he walked, he couldn't help noticing the banner flying above the camp. It bore the same symbol emblazoned on the soldiers' uniform coats: a yellow glyphpair in the shape of a tower and a hammer on a field of deep green. That was the banner of Highprince Sadeas, ultimate ruler of Kaladin's own home district. Was it irony or fate that had landed Kaladin here?

Soldiers lounged idly, even those who appeared to be on duty, and the camp streets were littered with refuse. Camp followers were plentiful: whores, worker women, coopers, chandlers, and wranglers. There were even children running through the streets of what was half city, half warcamp.

There were also parshmen. Carrying water, working on trenches, lifting sacks. That surprised him. Weren't they fighting parshmen? Weren't they worried that these would rise up? Apparently not. The parshmen here worked with the same docility as the ones back in Hearthstone. Perhaps it made sense. Alethi had fought against Alethi back in his armies at home, so why shouldn't there be parshmen on both sides of this conflict?

The soldiers took Kaladin all the way around to the northeastern quarter of the camp, a hike that took some time. Though the Soulcast stone barracks each looked exactly the same, the rim of the camp was broken distinctively, like ragged mountains. Old habits made him memorize the route. Here, the towering circular wall had been worn away by countless highstorms, giving a clear view eastward. That open patch of ground would make a good staging area for an army to gather on before marching down the incline to the Shattered Plains themselves.

The northern edge of the field contained a subcamp filled with several dozen barracks, and at their center a lumberyard filled with carpenters. They were breaking down some of the stout trees Kaladin had seen on the plains outside: stripping off their stringy bark, sawing them into planks. Another group of carpenters assembled the planks into large contraptions.

"We're to be woodworkers?" Kaladin asked.

One of the soldiers laughed roughly. "You're joining the bridge crews." He pointed to where a group of sorry-looking men sat on the stones in the shade of a barrack, scooping food out of wooden bowls with their fingers. It looked depressingly similar to the slop that Tvlakv had fed them.

One of the soldiers shoved Kaladin forward again, and he stumbled

down the shallow incline and crossed the grounds. The other nine slaves followed, herded by the soldiers. None of the men sitting around the barracks so much as glanced at them. They wore leather vests and simple trousers, some with dirty laced shirts, others bare-chested. The grim, sorry lot weren't much better than the slaves, though they did look to be in slightly better physical condition.

"New recruits, Gaz," one of the soldiers called.

A man lounged in the shade a distance from the eating men. He turned, revealing a face that was so scarred his beard grew in patches. He was missing one eye—the other was brown—and didn't bother with an eye patch. White knots at his shoulders marked him as a sergeant, and he had the lean toughness Kaladin had learned to associate with someone who knew his way around a battlefield.

"These spindly things?" Gaz said, chewing on something as he walked over. "They'll barely stop an arrow."

The soldier beside Kaladin shrugged, shoving him forward once more for good measure. "Brightness Hashal said to do something special with this one. The rest are up to you." The soldier nodded to his companions, and they began to trot away.

Gaz looked the slaves over. He focused on Kaladin last.

"I have military training," Kaladin said. "In the army of Highlord Amaram."

"I don't really care," Gaz cut in, spitting something dark to the side.

Kaladin hesitated. "When Amaram—"

"You keep mentioning that name," Gaz snapped. "Served under some unimportant landlord, did you? Expect me to be impressed?"

Kaladin sighed. He'd met this kind of man before, a lesser sergeant with no hope of advancement. His only pleasure in life came from his authority over those even sorer than himself. Well, so be it.

"You have a slave's mark," Gaz said, snorting. "I doubt you ever held a spear. Either way, you'll have to condescend to join us now, Lordship."

Kaladin's windspren flitted down and inspected Gaz, then closed one of her eyes, imitating him. For some reason, seeing her made Kaladin smile. Gaz misinterpreted the smile. The man scowled and stepped forward, pointing.

At that moment, a loud chorus of horns echoed through the camp. Carpenters glanced up, and the soldiers who had guided Kaladin dashed back toward the center of camp. The slaves behind Kaladin looked around anxiously.

"Stormfather!" Gaz cursed. "Bridgemen! Up, up, you louts!" He began kicking at some of the men who were eating. They scattered their bowls, scrambling to their feet. They wore simple sandals instead of proper boots.

“You, Lordship,” Gaz said, pointing at Kaladin.

“I didn’t say—”

“I don’t care what in Damnation you said! You’re in Bridge Four.” He pointed at a group of departing bridgemen. “The rest of you, go wait over there. I’ll divide you up later. Get moving, or I’ll see you strung up by your heels.”

Kaladin shrugged and jogged after the group of bridgemen. It was one of many teams of such men pouring out of barracks or picking themselves up out of alleys. There seemed to be quite a lot of them. Around fifty barracks, with—perhaps—twenty or thirty men in each . . . that would make nearly as many bridgemen in this army as there had been soldiers in Amaram’s entire force.

Kaladin’s team crossed the grounds, weaving between boards and piles of sawdust, approaching a large wooden contraption. It had obviously weathered a few highstorms and some battles. The dents and holes scattered along its length looked like places where arrows had struck. The bridge in bridgeman, perhaps?

Yes, Kaladin thought. It was a wooden bridge, over thirty feet long, eight feet wide. It sloped down at the front and back, and had no railings. The wood was thick, with the largest boards for support through the center. There were some forty or fifty bridges lined up here. Perhaps one for each barrack, making one crew for each bridge? About twenty bridge crews were gathering at this point.

Gaz had found himself a wooden shield and a gleaming mace, but there were none for anyone else. He quickly inspected each team. He stopped beside Bridge Four and hesitated. “Where’s your bridgeleader?” he demanded.

“Dead,” one of the bridgemen said. “Tossed himself down the Honor Chasm last night.”

Gaz cursed. “Can’t you keep a bridgeleader for even a week? Storm it! Line up; I’ll run near you. Listen for my commands. We’ll sort out another bridgeleader after we see who survives.” Gaz pointed at Kaladin. “You’re at the back, lordling. The rest of you, get moving! Storm you, I won’t suffer another reprimand because of you fools! Move, move!”

The others were lifting. Kaladin had no choice but to go to the open slot at the tail of the bridge. He’d been a little low in his assessment; looked like about thirty-five to forty men per bridge. There was room for five men across—three under the bridge and one on each side—and eight deep, though this crew didn’t have a man for each position.

He helped lift the bridge into the air. They were probably using a very light wood for the bridges, but the thing was still storms-cursed heavy. Kaladin grunted as he struggled with the weight, hoisting the bridge up

high and then stepping underneath. Men dashed in to fill the middle slots down the length of the structure, and slowly they all set the bridge down on their shoulders. At least there were rods on the bottom to use as handholds.

The other men had pads on the shoulders of their vests to cushion the weight and adjust their height to fit the supports. Kaladin hadn't been given a vest, so the wooden supports dug directly into his skin. He couldn't see a thing; there was an indentation for his head, but wood cut off his view to all sides. The men at the edges had better views; he suspected those spots were more coveted.

The wood smelled of oil and sweat.

"Go!" Gaz said from outside, voice muffled.

Kaladin grunted as the crew broke into a jog. He couldn't see where he was going, and struggled to keep from tripping as the bridge crew marched down the eastern slope to the Shattered Plains. Soon, Kaladin was sweating and cursing under his breath, the wood rubbing and digging into the skin on his shoulders. He was already starting to bleed.

"Poor fool," a voice said from the side.

Kaladin glanced to the right, but the wooden handholds obstructed his view. "Are you . . ." Kaladin puffed. "Are you talking to me?"

"You shouldn't have insulted Gaz," the man said. His voice sounded hollow. "He sometimes lets new men run in an outside row. Sometimes."

Kaladin tried to respond, but he was already gasping for breath. He'd thought himself in better shape than this, but he'd spent eight months being fed slop, being beaten, and waiting out highstorms in leaking cellars, muddy barns, or cages. He was hardly the same man anymore.

"Breathe in and out deeply," said the muffled voice. "Focus on the steps. Count them. It helps."

Kaladin followed the advice. He could hear other bridge crews running nearby. Behind them came the familiar sounds of men marching and hoofbeats on the stone. They were being followed by an army.

Below, rockbuds and small shalebark ridges grew from the stone, tripping him. The landscape of the Shattered Plains appeared to be broken, uneven, and rent, covered with outcroppings and shelves of rock. That explained why they didn't use wheels on the bridges—porters were probably much faster over such rough terrain.

Soon, his feet were ragged and battered. Couldn't they have given him shoes? He set his jaw against the agony and kept on going. Just another job. He would continue, and he would survive.

A thumping sound. His feet fell on wood. A bridge, a permanent one, crossing a chasm between plateaus on the Shattered Plains. In seconds the bridge crew was across it, and his feet fell on stone again.

“Move, move!” Gaz bellowed. “Storm you, keep going!”

They continued jogging as the army crossed the bridge behind them, hundreds of boots resounding on the wood. Before too long, blood ran down Kaladin’s shoulders. His breathing was torturous, his side aching painfully. He could hear others gasping, the sounds carrying through the confined space beneath the bridge. So he wasn’t the only one. Hopefully, they would arrive at their destination quickly.

He hoped in vain.

The next hour was torture. It was worse than any beating he’d suffered as a slave, worse than any wound on the battlefield. There seemed to be no end to the march. Kaladin vaguely remembered seeing the permanent bridges, back when he’d looked down on the plains from the slave cart. They connected the plateaus where the chasms were easiest to span, not where it would be most efficient for those traveling. That often meant detours north or south before they could continue eastward.

The bridgemen grumbled, cursed, groaned, then fell silent. They crossed bridge after bridge, plateau after plateau. Kaladin never got a good look at one of the chasms. He just kept running. And running. He couldn’t feel his feet any longer. He kept running. He knew, somehow, that if he stopped, he’d be beaten. He felt as if his shoulders had been rubbed to the bone. He tried counting steps, but was too exhausted even for that.

But he didn’t stop running.

Finally, mercifully, Gaz called for them to halt. Kaladin blinked, stumbling to a stop and nearly collapsing.

“Lift!” Gaz bellowed.

The men lifted, Kaladin’s arms straining at the motion after so much time holding the bridge in one place.

“Drop!”

They stepped aside, the bridgemen underneath taking handholds at the sides. It was awkward and difficult, but these men had practice, apparently. They kept the bridge from toppling as they set it on the ground.

“Push!”

Kaladin stumbled back in confusion as the men pushed at their handholds on the side or back of the bridge. They were at the edge of a chasm lacking a permanent bridge. To the sides, the other bridge crews were pushing their own bridges forward.

Kaladin glanced over his shoulder. The army was two thousand men in forest green and pure white. Twelve hundred darkeyed spearmen, several hundred cavalry atop rare, precious horses. Behind them, a large group of heavy foot, lighteyed men in thick armor and carrying large maces and square steel shields.

It seemed that they’d intentionally chosen a point where the chasm was

narrow and the first plateau was a little higher than the second. The bridge was twice as long as the chasm's width here. Gaz cursed at him, so Kaladin joined the others, shoving the bridge across the rough ground with a scraping sound. When the bridge thumped into place on the other side of the chasm, the bridge crew drew back to let the cavalry trot across.

He was too exhausted to watch. He collapsed to the stones and lay back, listening to sounds of foot soldiers tromping across the bridge. He rolled his head to the side. The other bridgemen had lain down as well. Gaz walked among the various crews, shaking his head, his shield on his back as he muttered about their worthlessness.

Kaladin longed to lie there, staring at the sky, oblivious of the world. His training, however, warned that might cause him to cramp up. That would make the return trip even worse. That training . . . it belonged to another man, from another time. Almost from the shadowdays. But while Kaladin might not *be* him any longer, he could still *heed* him.

And so, with a groan, Kaladin forced himself to sit up and begin rubbing his muscles. Soldiers crossed the bridge four across, spears held high, shields forward. Gaz watched them with obvious envy, and Kaladin's windspren danced around the man's head. Despite his fatigue, Kaladin felt a moment of jealousy. Why was she bothering that blowhard instead of Kaladin?

After a few minutes, Gaz noticed Kaladin and scowled at him.

"He's wondering why you aren't lying down," said a familiar voice. The man who had been running beside Kaladin lay on the ground a short distance away, staring up at the sky. He was older, with greying hair, and he had a long, leathery face to complement his kindly voice. He looked as exhausted as Kaladin felt.

Kaladin kept rubbing his legs, pointedly ignoring Gaz. Then he ripped off some portions of his sacklike clothing and bound his feet and shoulders. Fortunately, he was accustomed to walking barefoot as a slave, so the damage wasn't too bad.

As he finished, the last of the foot soldiers passed over the bridge. They were followed by several mounted lighteyes in gleaming armor. At their center rode a man in majestic, burnished red Shardplate. It was distinct from the one other Kaladin had seen—each suit was said to be an individual work of art—but it had the same *feel*. Ornate, interlocking, topped by a beautiful helm with an open visor.

The armor felt *alien* somehow. It had been crafted in another epoch, a time when gods had walked Roshar.

"Is that the king?" Kaladin asked.

The leathery bridgeman laughed tiredly. "We could only wish."

Kaladin turned toward him, frowning.

“If that were the king,” the bridgeman said, “then that would mean we were in Brightlord Dalinar’s army.”

The name was vaguely familiar to Kaladin. “He’s a highprince, right? The king’s uncle?”

“Aye. The best of men, the most honorable Shardbearer in the king’s army. They say he’s never broken his word.”

Kaladin sniffed in disdain. Much the same had been said about Amaram.

“You should wish to be in Highprince Dalinar’s force, lad,” the older man said. “He doesn’t use bridge crews. Not like these, at least.”

“All right, you cremlings!” Gaz bellowed. “On your feet!”

The bridgemen groaned, stumbling upright. Kaladin sighed. The brief rest had been just enough to show how exhausted he was. “I’ll be glad to get back,” he muttered.

“Back?” the leathery bridgeman said.

“We aren’t turning around?”

His friend chuckled wryly. “Lad, we aren’t *nearly* there yet. Be glad we aren’t. Arriving is the worst part.”

And so the nightmare began its second phase. They crossed the bridge, pulled it over behind them, then lifted it up on sore shoulders once more. They jogged across the plateau. At the other side, they lowered the bridge again to span another chasm. The army crossed, then it was back to carrying the bridge again.

They repeated this a good dozen times. They did get to rest between carries, but Kaladin was so sore and overworked that the brief respites weren’t enough. He barely caught his breath each time before being forced to pick up the bridge again.

They were expected to be quick about it. The bridgemen got to rest while the army crossed, but they had to make up the time by jogging across the plateaus—passing the ranks of soldiers—so that they could arrive at the next chasm before the army. At one point, his leathery-faced friend warned him that if they didn’t have their bridge in place quickly enough, they’d be punished with whippings when they returned to camp.

Gaz gave orders, cursing the bridgemen, kicking them when they moved too slowly, never doing any real work. It didn’t take long for Kaladin to nurture a seething hatred of the scrawny, scar-faced man. That was odd; he hadn’t felt hatred for his other sergeants. It was their *job* to curse at the men and keep them motivated.

That wasn’t what burned Kaladin. Gaz had sent him on this trip without sandals or a vest. Despite his bandages, Kaladin would bear scars from his work this day. He’d be so bruised and stiff in the morning that he’d be unable to walk.

What Gaz had done was the mark of a petty bully. He risked the mission by losing a carrier, all because of a hasty grudge.

Storming man, Kaladin thought, using his hatred of Gaz to sustain him through the ordeal. Several times after pushing the bridge into place, Kaladin collapsed, feeling sure he'd never be able to stand again. But when Gaz called for them to rise, Kaladin somehow struggled to his feet. It was either that or let Gaz win.

Why were they going through all of this? What was the point? Why were they running so much? They had to protect their bridge, the precious weight, the cargo. They had to hold up the sky and run, they had to . . .

He was growing delirious. Feet, running. One, two, one, two, one, two. "Stop!"

He stopped.

"Lift!"

He raised his hands up.

"Drop!"

He stepped back, then lowered the bridge.

"Push!"

He pushed the bridge.

Die.

That last command was his own, added each time. He fell back to the stone, a rockbud hastily withdrawing its vines as he touched them. He closed his eyes, no longer able to care about cramps. He entered a trance, a kind of half sleep, for what seemed like one heartbeat.

"Rise!"

He stood, stumbling on bloody feet.

"Cross!"

He crossed, not bothering to look at the deadly drop on either side.

"Pull!"

He grabbed a handhold and pulled the bridge across the chasm after him.

"Switch!"

Kaladin stood up dumbly. He didn't understand that command; Gaz had never given it before. The troops were forming ranks, moving with that mixture of skittishness and forced relaxation that men often went through before a battle. A few anticipationspren—like red streamers, growing from the ground and whipping in the wind—began to sprout from the rock and wave among the soldiers.

A battle?

Gaz grabbed Kaladin's shoulder and shoved him to the front of the bridge. "Newcomers get to go first at this part, Your Lordship." The sergeant smiled wickedly.

Kaladin dumbly picked up the bridge with the others, raising it over his head. The handholds were the same here, but this front row had a notched opening before his face, allowing him to see out. All of the bridgemen had changed positions; the men who had been running in the front moved to the back, and those at the back—including Kaladin and the leathery-faced bridgeman—moved to the front.

Kaladin didn't ask the point of it. He didn't care. He liked the front, though; jogging was easier now that he could see ahead of him.

The landscape on the plateaus was that of rough stormlands; there were scattered patches of grass, but the stone here was too hard for their seeds to fully burrow into. Rockbuds were more common, growing like bubbles across the entire plateau, imitating rocks about the size of a man's head. Many of the buds were split, trailing out their vines like thick green tongues. A few were even in bloom.

After so many hours breathing in the stuffy confines beneath the bridge, running in the front was almost relaxing. Why had they given such a wonderful position to a newcomer?

"Talenelat'Elin, bearer of all agonies," said the man to his right, voice horrified. "It's going to be a bad one. They're already lined up! It's going to be a bad one!"

Kaladin blinked, focusing on the approaching chasm. On the other side of the rift stood a rank of men with marbled crimson and black skin. They were wearing a strange rusty orange armor that covered their forearms, chests, heads, and legs. It took his numbed mind a moment to understand.

The Parshendi.

They weren't like common parshman workers. They were far more muscular, far more *solid*. They had the bulky build of soldiers, and each one carried a weapon strapped to his back. Some wore dark red and black beards tied with bits of rock, while others were clean-shaven.

As Kaladin watched, the front row of Parshendi knelt down. They held shortbows, arrows nocked. Not longbows intended to launch arrows high and far. Short, recurve bows to fire straight and quick and strong. An excellent bow to use for killing a group of bridgemen before they could lay their bridge.

Arriving is the worst part. . . .

Now, finally, the *real* nightmare began.

Gaz hung back, bellowing at the bridge crews to keep going. Kaladin's instincts screamed at him to get out of the line of fire, but the momentum of the bridge forced him forward. Forced him down the throat of the beast itself, its teeth poised to snap closed.

Kaladin's exhaustion and pain fled. He was shocked alert. The bridges

charged forward, the men beneath them screaming as they ran. Ran toward death.

The archers released.

The first wave killed Kaladin's leathery-faced friend, dropping him with three separate arrows. The man to Kaladin's left fell as well—Kaladin hadn't even seen his face. That man cried out as he dropped, not dead immediately, but the bridge crew trampled him. The bridge got noticeably heavier as men died.

The Parshendi calmly drew a second volley and launched. To the side, Kaladin barely noticed another of the bridge crews floundering. The Parshendi seemed to focus their fire on certain crews. That one got a full wave of arrows from dozens of archers, and the first three rows of bridgemen dropped and tripped those behind them. Their bridge lurched, skidding on the ground and making a sickening crunch as the mass of bodies fell over one another.

Arrows zipped past Kaladin, killing the other two men in the front line with him. Several other arrows smacked into the wood around him, one slicing open the skin of his cheek.

He screamed. In horror, in shock, in pain, in sheer bewilderment. Never before had he felt so powerless in a battle. He'd charged enemy fortifications, he'd run beneath waves of arrows, but he'd always felt a measure of control. He'd had his spear, he'd had his shield, he could fight back.

Not this time. The bridge crews were like hogs running to the slaughter.

A third volley flew, and another of the twenty bridge crews fell. Waves of arrows came from the Alethi side as well, falling and striking the Parshendi. Kaladin's bridge was almost to the chasm. He could see the black eyes of the Parshendi on the other side, could make out the features of their lean marbled faces. All around him, bridgemen were screaming in pain, arrows cutting them out from underneath their bridges. There was a crashing sound as another bridge dropped, its bridgemen slaughtered.

Behind, Gaz called out. "Lift and down, you fools!"

The bridge crew lurched to a stop as the Parshendi launched another volley. Men behind Kaladin screamed. The Parshendi firing was interrupted by a return volley from the Alethi army. Though he was shocked senseless, Kaladin's reflexes knew what to do. Drop the bridge, get into position to push.

This exposed the bridgemen who had been safe in the back ranks. The Parshendi archers obviously knew this was coming; they prepared and launched one final volley. Arrows struck the bridge in a wave, dropping a half-dozen men, spraying blood across the dark wood. Fearspren—wiggling and violet—sprang up through the wood and wriggled in the air. The bridge lurched, growing much harder to push as they suddenly lost those men.

Kaladin stumbled, hands slipping. He fell to his knees and pitched out, leaning over the chasm. He barely managed to catch himself.

He teetered, one hand dangling above the void, the other gripping the edge. His overextended mind wavered with vertigo as he stared down that sheer cliff, down into darkness. The height was beautiful; he'd always loved climbing high rock formations with Tien.

By reflex, he shoved himself back onto the plateau, scrambling backward. A group of foot soldiers, protected by shields, had taken up positions pushing the bridge. The army's archers exchanged arrows with the Parshendi as the soldiers pushed the bridge into place and heavy cavalry thundered across, smashing into the Parshendi. Four bridges had fallen, but sixteen had been placed in a row, allowing for an effective charge.

Kaladin tried to move, tried to crawl away from the bridge. But he just collapsed where he was, his body refusing to obey. He couldn't even roll over onto his stomach.

I should go . . . he thought in exhaustion. See if that leathery-faced man is still alive. . . . Bind his wounds. . . . Save. . . .

But he couldn't. He couldn't move. Couldn't think. To his shame, he just let himself close his eyes and gave himself over to unconsciousness.



"Kaladin."

He didn't want to open his eyes. To wake meant returning to that awful world of pain. A world where defenseless, exhausted men were made to charge lines of archers.

That world was the nightmare.

"Kaladin!" The feminine voice was soft, like a whisper, yet still urgent. "They're going to leave you. Get up! You'll die!"

I can't . . . I can't go back. . . .

Let me go.

Something snapped against his face, a slight *slap* of energy with a sting to it. He cringed. It was nothing compared with his other pains, but somehow it was far more demanding. He raised a hand, swatting. The motion was enough to drive away the last vestiges of stupor.

He tried to open his eyes. One refused, blood from a cut on his cheek having run down and crusted around the eyelid. The sun had moved. Hours had passed. He groaned—sitting up, rubbing the dried blood from his eye. The ground near him was littered with bodies. The air smelled of blood and worse.

A pair of sorry bridgemen were shaking each man in turn, checking for life, then pulling the vests and sandals off their bodies, shooing away the

cremlings feeding on the bodies. The men would never have checked on Kaladin. He didn't have anything for them to take. They'd have left him with the corpses, stranded on the plateau.

Kaladin's windspren flitted through the air above him, moving anxiously. He rubbed his jaw where she'd struck him. Large spren like her could move small objects and give little pinches of energy. That made them all the more annoying.

This time, it had probably saved Kaladin's life. He groaned at all the places where he hurt. "Do you have a name, spirit?" he asked, forcing himself to his battered feet.

On the plateau the army had crossed to, soldiers were picking through the corpses of the dead Parshendi, looking for something. Harvesting equipment, maybe? It appeared that Sadeas's force had won. At least, there didn't seem to be any Parshendi still alive. They'd either been killed or had fled.

The plateau they'd fought on seemed exactly like the others they'd crossed. The only thing that was different here was that there was a large lump of . . . something in the center of the plateau. It looked like an enormous rockbud, perhaps some kind of chrysalis or shell, a good twenty feet tall. One side had been hacked open, exposing slimy innards. He hadn't noticed it on the initial charge; the archers had demanded all of his attention.

"A name," the windspren said, her voice distant. "Yes. I *do* have a name." She seemed surprised as she looked at Kaladin. "Why do I have a name?"

"How should I know?" Kaladin said, forcing himself to move. His feet blazed with pain. He could barely limp.

The nearby bridgemen looked to him with surprise, but he ignored them, limping across the plateau until he found the corpse of a bridgeman who still had his vest and shoes. It was the leathery-faced man who had been so kind to him, dead with an arrow through the neck. Kaladin ignored those shocked eyes, staring blankly into the sky, and harvested the man's clothing—leather vest, leather sandals, lacing shirt stained red with blood. Kaladin felt disgusted with himself, but he wasn't going to count on Gaz giving him clothing.

Kaladin sat down and used the cleaner parts of the shirt to change his improvised bandages, then put on the vest and sandals, trying to keep from moving too much. A breeze now blew, carrying away the scents of blood and the sounds of soldiers calling to one another. The cavalry was already forming up, as if eager to return.

"A name," the windspren said, walking through the air to stand beside his face. She was in the shape of a young woman, complete with flowing skirt and delicate feet. "Sylphrena."

"Sylphrena," Kaladin repeated, tying on the sandals.

“Syl,” the spirit said. She cocked her head. “That’s amusing. It appears that I have a nickname.”

“Congratulations.” Kaladin stood up again, wobbling.

To the side, Gaz stood with hands on hips, shield tied to his back. “You,” he said, pointing at Kaladin. He then gestured to the bridge.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Kaladin said, looking as the remnants of the bridge crew—fewer than half of their previous number remained—gathered around the bridge.

“Either carry or stay behind,” Gaz said. He seemed angry about something.

I was supposed to die, Kaladin realized. That’s why he didn’t care if I had a vest or sandals. I was at the front. Kaladin was the only one on the first row who had lived.

Kaladin nearly sat down and let them leave him. But dying of thirst on a lonely plateau was not the way he’d choose to go. He stumbled over to the bridge.

“Don’t worry,” said one of the other bridgemen. “They’ll let us go slow this time, take lots of breaks. And we’ll have a few soldiers to help—takes at least twenty-five men to lift a bridge.”

Kaladin sighed, getting into place as some unfortunate soldiers joined them. Together, they heaved the bridge into the air. It was terribly heavy, but they managed it, somehow.

Kaladin walked, feeling numb. He’d thought that there was nothing more life could do to him, nothing worse than the slave’s brand with a *shash*, nothing worse than losing all he had to the war, nothing more terrible than failing those he’d sworn to protect.

It appeared that he’d been wrong. There *had* been something more they could do to him. One final torment the world had reserved just for Kaladin.

And it was called Bridge Four.

III



“They are aflame. They burn. They bring the darkness when they come, and so all you can see is that their skin is aflame. Burn, burn, burn...”

—Collected on Palahishev, 1172, 21 seconds pre-death. Subject was a baker’s apprentice.

Shallan hurried down the hallway with its burnt-orange colorings, the ceiling and upper walls now stained by the passing of black smoke from Jasnah’s Soulcasting. Hopefully, the paintings on the walls hadn’t been ruined.

Ahead, a small group of parshmen arrived, bearing rags, buckets, and stepladders to use in wiping off the soot. They bowed to her as she passed, uttering no words. Parshmen could speak, but they rarely did so. Many seemed mute. As a child, she’d found the patterns of their marbled skin beautiful. That had been before her father forbade her to spend any time with the parshmen.

She turned her mind to her task. How was she going to convince Jasnah Kholin, one of the most powerful women in the world, to change her mind about taking Shallan as a ward? The woman was obviously stubborn; she had spent years resisting the devotaries’ attempts at reconciliation.

She reentered the broad main cavern, with its lofty stone ceiling and bustling, well-dressed occupants. She felt daunted, but that brief glimpse of the Soulcaster seduced her. Her family, House Davar, had prospered in recent years, coming out of obscurity. This had primarily been because of her father’s skill in politics—he had been hated by many, but his ruthless-

ness had carried him far. So had the wealth lent by the discovery of several important new marble deposits on Davar lands.

Shallan had never known enough to be suspicious of that wealth's origins. Every time the family had exhausted one of its quarries, her father had gone out with his surveyor and discovered a new one. Only after interrogating the surveyor had Shallan and her brothers discovered the truth: Her father, using his forbidden Soulcaster, had been *creating* new deposits at a careful rate. Not enough to be suspicious. Just enough to give him the money he needed to further his political goals.

Nobody knew where he'd gotten the fabrial, which she now carried in her safe pouch. It was unusable, damaged on the same disastrous evening that her father had died. *Don't think about that*, she told herself forcefully.

They'd had a jeweler repair the broken Soulcaster, but it no longer worked. Their house steward—one of her father's close confidants, an advisor named Luesh—had been trained to use the device, and he could no longer make it function.

Her father's debts and promises were outrageous. Their choices were limited. Her family had some time—perhaps as long as a year—before the missed payments became egregious, and before her father's absence became obvious. For once, her family's isolated, backcountry estates were an advantage, providing a reason that communications were being delayed. Her brothers were scrambling, writing letters in her father's name, making a few appearances and spreading rumors that Brightlord Davar was planning something big.

All to give her time to make good on her bold plan. Find Jasnah Kholin. Become her ward. Learn where she kept her Soulcaster. Then replace it with the nonfunctional one.

With the fabrial, they'd be able to make new quarries and restore their wealth. They'd be able to make food to feed their house soldiers. With enough wealth in hand to pay off debts and make bribes, they could announce their father's death and not suffer destruction.

Shallan hesitated in the main hallway, considering her next move. What she planned to do was very risky. She'd have to escape without implicating herself in the theft. Though she'd devoted much thought to that, she still didn't know how she'd manage it. But Jasnah was known to have many enemies. There had to be a way to pin the fabrial's "breaking" on them instead.

That step would come later. For now, Shallan *had* to convince Jasnah to accept her as a ward. All other results were unacceptable.

Nervously, Shallan held her arms in the sign of need, covered safehand bent across her chest and touching the elbow of her freehand, which was

raised with fingers outspread. A woman approached, wearing the well-starched white laced shirt and black skirt that were the universal sign of a master-servant.

The stout woman curtsied. "Brightness?"

"The Palanaeum," Shallan said.

The woman bowed and led Shallan farther into the depths of the long hallway. Most of the women here—servants included—wore their hair bound, and Shallan felt conspicuous with hers loose. The deep red color made her stand out even more.

Soon, the grand hallway began to slope down steeply. But when the half-hour arrived, she could still hear distant bells ring behind her. Perhaps that was why the people here liked them so much; even in the depths of the Conclave, one could hear the outside world.

The servant led Shallan to a pair of grand steel doors. The servant bowed and Shallan dismissed her with a nod.

Shallan couldn't help but admire the beauty of the doors; their exterior was carved in an intricate geometric pattern with circles and lines and glyphs. It was some kind of chart, half on each door. There was no time to study the details, unfortunately, and she passed them by.

Beyond the doors was a breathtakingly large room. The sides were of smooth rock and they stretched high; the dim illumination made it impossible to tell just how high, but she saw flickers of distant light. Set into the walls were dozens of small balconies, much like the private box seats of a theater. Soft light shone from many of these. The only sounds were turning pages and faint whispers. Shallan raised her safehand to her breast, feeling dwarfed by the magnificent chamber.

"Brightness?" a young male master-servant said, approaching. "What do you need?"

"A new sense of perspective, apparently," Shallan said absently. "How . . ."

"This room is called the Veil," the servant explained softly. "That which comes before the Palanaeum itself. Both were here when the city was founded. Some think these chambers might have been cut by the Dawn-singers themselves."

"Where are the books?"

"The Palanaeum proper is this way." The servant gestured, leading her to a set of doors on the other side of the room. Through them, she entered a smaller chamber that was partitioned with walls of thick crystal. Shallan approached the nearest one, feeling it. The crystal's surface was rough like hewn rock.

"Soulcast?" she asked.

The servant nodded. Behind him, another servant passed leading an elderly ardent. Like most ardents, the aged man had a shaved head and a

long beard. His simple grey robes were tied with a brown sash. The servant led him around a corner, and Shallan could vaguely make out their shapes on the other side, shadows swimming through the crystal.

She took a step forward, but her servant cleared his throat. "I will need your chit of admittance, Brightness."

"How much does one cost?" Shallan asked hesitantly.

"A thousand sapphire broams."

"So much?"

"The king's many hospitals require much upkeep," the man said apologetically. "The only things Kharbranth has to sell are fish, bells, and information. The first two are hardly unique to us. But the third . . . well, the Palanaeum has the finest collection of tomes and scrolls on Roshar. More, even, than the Holy Enclave in Valath. At last count, there were over seven hundred thousand separate texts in our archive."

Her father had owned exactly eighty-seven books. Shallan had read them all several times over. How much could be contained in *seven hundred thousand* books? The weight of that much information dazzled her. She found herself hungering to look through those hidden shelves. She could spend months just reading their titles.

But no. Perhaps once she'd made certain her brothers were safe—once her house's finances were restored—she could return. Perhaps.

She felt like she was starving, yet leaving a warm fruit pie uneaten. "Where might I wait?" she asked. "If someone I know is inside."

"You may use one of the reading alcoves," the servant said, relaxing. Perhaps he'd feared that she would make a scene. "No chit is required to sit in one. There are parshman porters who will raise you to the higher levels, if that is what you wish."

"Thank you," Shallan said, turning her back on the Palanaeum. She felt like a child again, locked in her room, not allowed to run through the gardens because of her father's paranoid fears. "Does Brightness Jasnah have an alcove yet?"

"I can ask," the servant said, leading the way back into the Veil, with its distant, unseen ceiling. He hurried off to speak with some others, leaving Shallan standing beside the doorway to the Palanaeum.

She could run in. Sneak through—

No. Her brothers teased her for being too timid, but it was not timidity that held her back. There would undoubtedly be guards; bursting in would not only be futile, it would ruin any chance she had of changing Jasnah's mind.

Change Jasnah's mind, prove herself. Considering it made her sick. She *hated* confrontation. During her youth, she'd felt like a piece of delicate crystalware, locked in a cabinet to be displayed but never touched. The

only daughter, the last memory of Brightlord Davar's beloved wife. It still felt odd to her that *she* been the one to take charge after . . . After the incident . . . After . . .

Memories attacked her. Nan Balat bruised, his coat torn. A long, silvery sword in her hand, sharp enough to cut stones as if they were water.

No, Shallan thought, her back to the stone wall, clutching her satchel. *No. Don't think of the past.*

She sought solace in drawing, raising fingers to her satchel and reaching for her paper and pencils. The servant came back before she had a chance to get them out, however. "Brightness Jasnah Kholin has indeed asked that a reading alcove be set aside for her," he said. "You may wait there for her, if you wish it."

"I do," Shallan said. "Thank you."

The servant led her to a shadowed enclosure, inside of which four parshmen stood upon a sturdy wooden platform. The servant and Shallan stepped onto the platform, and the parshmen pulled ropes that were strung into a pulley above, raising the platform up the stone shaft. The only lights were broom spheres set at each corner of the lift's ceiling. Amethysts, which had a soft violet light.

She needed a plan. Jasnah Kholin did not seem the type to change her mind easily. Shallan would have to surprise her, impress her.

They reached a level about forty feet or so off the ground, and the servant waved for the porters to stop. Shallan followed the master-servant down a dark hallway to one of the small balconies that extended out over the Veil. It was round, like a turret, and had a waist-high stone rim with a wooden railing above that. Other occupied alcoves glowed with different colors from the spheres being used to light them; the darkness of the huge space made them seem to hover in the air.

This alcove had a long, curving stone desk joined directly into the rim of the balcony. There was a single chair and a gobletlike crystal bowl. Shallan nodded in thanks to the servant, who withdrew, then she pulled out a handful of spheres and dropped them into the bowl, lighting the alcove.

She sighed, sitting down in the chair and laying her satchel on the desk. She undid the laces on her satchel, busying herself as she tried to think of something—anything—that would persuade Jasnah.

First, she decided, *I need to clear my mind.*

From her satchel she removed a sheaf of thick drawing paper, a set of charcoal pencils of different widths, some brushes and steel pens, ink, and watercolors. Finally, she took out her smaller notebook, bound in codex form, which contained the nature sketches she'd done during her weeks aboard the *Wind's Pleasure*.

116 These were simple things, really, but worth more to her than a chest full

of spheres. She took a sheet off the stack, then selected a fine-pointed charcoal pencil, rolling it between her fingers. She closed her eyes and fixed an image in her mind: Kharbranth as she'd memorized it in that moment soon after landing on the docks. Waves surging against the wooden posts, a salty scent to the air, men climbing rigging calling one another with excitement. And the city itself, rising up the hillside, homes stacked atop homes, not a speck of land wasted. Bells, distant, tinkling softly in the air.

She opened her eyes and began to draw. Her fingers moved on their own, sketching broad lines first. The cracklike valley the city was situated in. The port. Here, squares to be homes, there a slash to mark a switchback of the grand roadway that led up to the Conclave. Slowly, bit by bit, she added detail. Shadows as windows. Lines to fill out the roadways. Hints of people and carts to show the chaos of the thoroughfares.

She had read of how sculptors worked. Many would take a blank stone block and work it into a vague shape first. Then, they'd work it over again, carving more detail with each pass. It was the same for her in drawing. Broad lines first, then some details, then more, then down to the finest of lines. She had no formal training in pencils; she simply did what felt right.

The city took shape beneath her fingers. She coaxed it free, line by line, scratch by scratch. What would she do without this? Tension bled from her body, as if released from her fingertips into the pencil.

She lost track of time as she worked. Sometimes she felt like she was entering a trance, everything else fading. Her fingers almost seemed to draw of their own accord. It was so much easier to think while drawing.

Before too long, she had copied her Memory onto the page. She held up the sheet, satisfied, relaxed, her mind clear. The memorized image of Kharbranth was gone from her head; she'd released it into her sketch. There was a sense of relaxation to that too. As if her mind was put under tension holding Memories until they could be used.

She did Yalb next, standing shirtless in his vest and gesturing to the short porter who had pulled her up to the Conclave. She smiled as she worked, remembering Yalb's affable voice. He'd likely returned to the *Wind's Pleasure* by now. Had it been two hours? Probably.

She was always more excited by drawing animals and people than she was by drawing things. There was something energizing about putting a living creature onto the page. A city was lines and boxes, but a person was circles and curves. Could she get that smirk on Yalb's face right? Could she show his lazy contentedness, the way he would flirt with a woman far above his station? And the porter, with his thin fingers and sandaled feet, his long coat and baggy pants. His strange language, his keen eyes, his plan to increase his tip by offering not just a ride, but a tour.

When she drew, she didn't feel as if she worked with only charcoal and paper. In drawing a portrait, her medium was the soul itself. There were plants from which one could remove a tiny cutting—a leaf, or a bit of stem—then plant it and grow a duplicate. When she collected a Memory of a person, she was snipping free a bud of their soul, and she cultivated and grew it on the page. Charcoal for sinew, paper pulp for bone, ink for blood, the paper's texture for skin. She fell into a rhythm, a cadence, the scratching of her pencil like the sound of breathing from those she depicted.

Creationspren began to gather around her pad, looking at her work. Like other spren, they were said to always be around, but usually invisible. Sometimes you attracted them. Sometimes you didn't. With drawing, skill seemed to make a difference.

Creationspren were of medium size, as tall as one of her fingers, and they glowed with a faint silvery light. They transformed perpetually, taking new shapes. Usually the shapes were things they had seen recently. An urn, a person, a table, a wheel, a nail. Always of the same silvery color, always the same diminutive height. They imitated shapes exactly, but moved them in strange ways. A table would roll like a wheel, an urn would shatter and repair itself.

Her drawing gathered about a half-dozen of them, pulling them by her act of creation just as a bright fire would draw flamespren. She'd learned to ignore them. They weren't substantial—if she moved her arm through one, its figure would smear like scattered sand, then re-form. She never felt a thing when touching one.

Eventually, she held up the page, satisfied. It depicted Yalb and the porter in detail, with hints of the busy city behind. She'd gotten their eyes right. That was the most important. Each of the Ten Essences had an analogous part of the human body—blood for liquid, hair for wood, and so forth. The eyes were associated with crystal and glass. The windows into a person's mind and spirit.

She set the page aside. Some men collected trophies. Others collected weapons or shields. Many collected spheres.

Shallan collected people. People, and interesting creatures. Perhaps it was because she'd spent so much of her youth in a virtual prison. She'd developed the habit of memorizing faces, then drawing them later, after her father had discovered her sketching the gardeners. His daughter? Drawing pictures of darkeyes? He'd been furious with her—one of the infrequent times he'd directed his infamous temper at his daughter.

After that, she'd done drawings of people only when in private, instead using her open drawing times to sketch the insects, crustaceans, and plants of the manor gardens. Her father hadn't minded this—zoology and botany

were proper feminine pursuits—and had encouraged her to choose natural history as her Calling.

She took out a third blank sheet. It seemed to beg her to fill it. A blank page was nothing but potential, pointless until it was used. Like a fully infused sphere cloistered inside a pouch, prevented from making its light useful.

Fill me.

The creationspren gathered around the page. They were still, as if curious, anticipatory. Shallan closed her eyes and imagined Jasnah Kholin, standing before the blocked door, the Soulcaster glowing on her hand. The hallway hushed, save for a child's sniffles. Attendants holding their breath. An anxious king. A still reverence.

Shallan opened her eyes and began to draw with vigor, intentionally losing herself. The less she was in the *now* and the more she was in the *then*, the better the sketch would be. The other two pictures had been warm-ups; this was the day's masterpiece. With the paper bound onto the board—safehand holding that—her freehand flew across the page, occasionally switching to other pencils. Soft charcoal for deep, thick blackness, like Jasnah's beautiful hair. Hard charcoal for light greys, like the powerful waves of light coming from the Soulcaster's gems.

For a few extended moments, Shallan was back in that hallway again, watching something that should not be: a heretic wielding one of the most sacred powers in all the world. The power of change itself, the power by which the Almighty had created Roshar. He had another name, allowed to pass only the lips of ardents. *Elithanathile*. He Who Transforms.

Shallan could smell the musty hallway. She could hear the child whimpering. She could feel her own heart beating in anticipation. The boulder would soon change. Sucking away the Stormlight in Jasnah's gemstone, it would give up its essence, becoming something new. Shallan's breath caught in her throat.

And then the memory faded, returning her to the quiet, dim alcove. The page now held a perfect rendition of the scene, worked in blacks and greys. The princess's proud figure regarded the fallen stone, demanding that it give way before her will. It *was* her. Shallan knew, with the intuitive certainty of an artist, that this was one of the finest pieces she had ever done. In a very small way, she had captured Jasnah Kholin, something the devotaries had never managed. That gave her a euphoric thrill. Even if this woman rejected Shallan again, one fact would not change. Jasnah Kholin had joined Shallan's collection.

Shallan wiped her fingers on her cleaning cloth, then lifted the paper. She noted absently that she'd attracted some two dozen creationspren

now. She would have to lacquer the page with plytree sap to set the charcoal and protect it from smudges. She had some in her satchel. First she wanted to study the page and the figure it contained. Who *was* Jasnah Kholin? Not one to be cowed, certainly. She was a woman to the bone, master of the feminine arts, but not by any means delicate.

Such a woman would appreciate Shallan's determination. She *would* listen to another request for wardship, assuming it was presented properly.

Jasnah was also a rationalist, a woman with the audacity to deny the existence of the Almighty himself based on her own reasoning. Jasnah would appreciate strength, but only if it was shaped by logic.

Shallan nodded to herself, taking out a fourth sheet of paper and a fine-tipped brushpen, then shaking and opening her jar of ink. Jasnah had demanded proof of Shallan's logical and writing skills. Well, what better way to do that than to supplicate the woman with words?

Brightness Jasnah Kholin, Shallan wrote, painting the letters as neatly and beautifully as she could. She could have used a reed instead, but a brushpen was for works of art. She intended this page to be just that. *You have rejected my petition. I accept that. Yet, as anyone trained in formal inquiry knows, no supposition should be treated as axiomatic.* The actual argument usually read "no supposition—save for the existence of the Almighty himself—should be held as axiomatic." But this wording would appeal to Jasnah.

A scientist must be willing to change her theories if experiment disproves them. I hold to the hope that you treat decisions in a like manner: as preliminary results pending further information.

From our brief interaction, I can see that you appreciate tenacity. You complimented me on continuing to seek you out. Therefore, I presume that you will not find this letter a breach of good taste. Take it as proof of my ardor to be your ward, and not as disdain for your expressed decision.

Shallan raised the end of her brushpen to her lips as she considered her next step. The creationspren slowly faded away, vanishing. There were said to be logicspren—in the form of tiny stormclouds—who were attracted to great arguments, but Shallan had never seen them.

You expect proof of my worthiness, Shallan continued. I wish I could demonstrate that my schooling is more complete than our interview revealed. Unfortunately, I haven't the grounds for such an argument. I have weaknesses in my understanding. That is plain and not subject to reasonable dispute.

But the lives of men and women are more than logical puzzles; the context of their experiences is invaluable in making good decisions. My study in logic does not rise to your standards, but even I know that the rationalists have a rule: One cannot apply logic as an absolute where human beings are concerned. We are not beings of thought only.

Therefore, the soul of my argument here is to give perspective on my ignorance. Not by way of excuse, but of explanation. You expressed displeasure that one such as I should be trained so inadequately. What of my stepmother? What of my tutors? Why was my education handled so poorly?

The facts are embarrassing. I have had few tutors and virtually no education. My stepmother tried, but she had no education herself. It is a carefully guarded secret, but many of the rural Veden houses ignore the proper training of their women.

I had three different tutors when I was very young, but each left after a few months, citing my father's temper or rudeness as her reason. I was left to my own devices in education. I have learned what I could through reading, filling in the gaps by taking advantage of my own curious nature. But I will not be capable of matching knowledge with someone who has been given the benefit of a formal—and expensive—education.

Why is this an argument that you should accept me? Because everything I have learned has come by way of great personal struggle. What others were handed, I had to hunt. I believe that because of this, my education—limited though it is—has extra worth and merit. I respect your decisions, but I do ask you to reconsider. Which would you rather have? A ward who is able to repeat the correct answers because an overpriced tutor drilled them into her, or a ward who had to struggle and fight for everything she has learned?

I assure you that one of those two will prize your teachings far more than the other.

She raised her brush. Her arguments seemed imperfect now that she considered them. She exposed her ignorance, then expected Jasnah to welcome her? Still, it seemed the right thing to do, for all the fact that this letter was a lie. A lie built of truths. She hadn't truly come to partake of Jasnah's knowledge. She had come as a thief.

That made her conscience itch, and she nearly reached out and crumpled the page. Steps in the hallway outside made her freeze. She leaped to her feet, spinning, safehand held to her breast. She fumbled for words to explain her presence to Jasnah Kholin.

Light and shadows flickered in the hallway, then a figure hesitantly looked into the alcove, a single white sphere cupped in one hand for light. It was *not* Jasnah. It was a man in his early twenties wearing simple grey robes. An ardent. Shallan relaxed.

The young man noticed her. His face was narrow, his blue eyes keen. His beard was trimmed short and square, his head shaved. When he spoke, his voice had a cultured tone. "Ah, excuse me, Brightness. I thought this was the alcove of Jasnah Kholin."

"It is," Shallan said.

"Oh. You're waiting for her too?"

"Yes."

“Would you mind terribly if I waited with you?” He had a faint Herdazian accent.

“Of course not, Ardent.” She nodded her head in respect, then gathered up her things in haste, preparing the seat for him.

“I can’t take your seat, Brightness! I’ll fetch another for myself.”

She raised a hand in protest, but he had already retreated. He returned a few moments later, carrying a chair from another alcove. He was tall and lean, and—she decided with slight discomfort—rather handsome. Her father had owned only three ardent, all elderly men. They had traveled his lands and visited the villages, ministering to the people, helping them reach Points in their Glories and Callings. She had their faces in her collection of portraits.

The ardent set down his chair. He hesitated before sitting, glancing at the table. “My, my,” he said in surprise.

For a moment, Shallan thought he was reading her letter, and she felt an irrational surge of panic. The ardent, however, was regarding the three drawings that lay at the head of the table, awaiting lacquer.

“You did these, Brightness?” he said.

“Yes, Ardent,” Shallan said, lowering her eyes.

“No need to be so formal!” the ardent said, leaning down and adjusting his spectacles as he studied her work. “Please, I am Brother Kabsal, or just Kabsal. Really, it’s fine. And you are?”

“Shallan Davar.”

“By Vedelev’s golden keys, Brightness!” Brother Kabsal said, seating himself. “Did Jasnah Kholin teach you this skill with the pencil?”

“No, Ardent,” she said, still standing.

“Still so formal,” he said, smiling at her. “Tell me, am I so intimidating as that?”

“I have been brought up to show respect to ardent.”

“Well, I myself find that respect is like manure. Use it where needed, and growth will flourish. Spread it on too thick, and things just start to smell.” His eyes twinkled.

Had an *ardent*—a servant of the Almighty—just spoken of *manure*? “An ardent is a representative of the Almighty himself,” she said. “To show you lack of respect would be to show it to the Almighty.”

“I see. And this is how you’d respond if the Almighty himself appeared to you here? All of this formality and bowing?”

She hesitated. “Well, no.”

“Ah, and how *would* you react?”

“I suspect with screams of pain,” she said, letting her thought slip out too easily. “As it is written that the Almighty’s glory is such that any who look upon him would immediately be burned to ash.”

The ardent laughed at that. "Wisely spoken indeed. Please, do sit, though."
She did so, hesitant.

"You still appear conflicted," he said, holding up her portrait of Jasnah. "What must I do to put you at ease? Shall I step up onto this desk here and do a jig?"

She blinked in surprise.

"No objection?" Brother Kabsal said. "Well, then . . ." He set down the portrait and began to climb up on his chair.

"No, please!" Shallan said, holding out her freehand.

"Are you certain?" he glanced at the desk appraisingly.

"Yes," Shallan said, imagining the ardent teetering and making a misstep, then falling off the balcony and plunging dozens of feet to the ground below. "Please, I promise not to respect you any longer!"

He chuckled, hopping down and seating himself. He leaned closer to her, as if conspiratorially. "The table jig threat almost always works. I've only ever had to go through with it once, due to a lost bet against Brother Lhanin. The master ardent of our monastery nearly keeled over in shock."

Shallan found herself smiling. "You're an ardent; you're forbidden to have possessions. What did you bet?"

"Two deep breaths of a winter rose's fragrance," said Brother Kabsal, "and the sunlight's warmth on your skin." He smiled. "We can be rather creative at times. Years spent marinating in a monastery can do that to a man. Now, you were about to explain to me where you learned such skill with a pencil."

"Practice," Shallan said. "I should suspect that is how everyone learns, eventually."

"Wise words again. I am beginning to wonder which of us is the ardent. But surely you had a master to teach you."

"Dandos the Oilsworn."

"Ah, a true master of pencils if there ever was one. Now, not that I doubt your word, Brightness, but I'm rather intrigued how Dandos Heraldin could have trained you in arts, as—last I checked—he's suffering a rather terminal and perpetual ailment. Namely, that of being *dead*. For three hundred years."

Shallan blushed. "My father had a book of his instruction."

"You learned this," Kabsal said, lifting up her drawing of Jasnah, "from a *book*."

"Er . . . yes?"

He looked back at the picture. "I need to read more."

Shallan found herself laughing at the ardent's expression, and she took a Memory of him sitting there, admiration and perplexity blending on his face as he studied the picture, rubbing his bearded chin with one finger.

He smiled pleasantly, setting down the picture. "You have lacquer?"

"I do," she said, getting it out of her satchel. It was contained in a bulb sprayer of the type often used for perfume.

He accepted the small jar and twisted the clasp on the front, then gave the bottle a shake and tested the lacquer on the back of his hand. He nodded in satisfaction and reached for the drawing. "A piece such as this should not be allowed to risk smudging."

"I can lacquer it," Shallan said. "No need to trouble yourself."

"It is no trouble; it's an honor. Besides, I am an ardent. We don't know what to do with ourselves when we aren't busying about, doing things others could do for themselves. It is best just to humor me." He began to apply the lacquer, dusting the page with careful puffs.

She had trouble keeping herself from reaching to snatch the sketch away. Fortunately, his hands were careful, and the lacquer went on evenly. He'd obviously done this before.

"You are from Jah Keved, I presume?" he asked.

"From the hair?" she asked, raising a hand to her red locks. "Or from the accent?"

"From the way you treat ardents. The Veden Church is by far the most traditional. I have visited your lovely country on two occasions; while your food sits well in my stomach, the amount of bowing and scraping you show ardents made me uncomfortable."

"Perhaps you should have danced on a few tables."

"I considered it," he said, "but my brother and sister ardents from your country would likely have dropped dead of embarrassment. I would hate to have that on my conscience. The Almighty is not kind toward those who kill his priests."

"I should think that killing in general would be frowned upon," she responded, still watching him apply the lacquer. It felt odd to let someone else work on her art.

"What does Brightness Jasnah think of your skill?" he asked as he worked.

"I don't think she cares," Shallan said, grimacing and remembering her conversation with the woman. "She doesn't seem terribly appreciative of the visual arts."

"So I have heard. It's one of her few faults, unfortunately."

"Another being that little matter of her heresy?"

"Indeed," Kabsal said, smiling. "I must admit, I stepped in here expecting indifference, not deference. How did you come to be part of her entourage?"

Shallan started, realizing for the first time that Brother Kabsal must have assumed her to be one of the Brightlady Kholin's attendants. Perhaps a ward.

“Bother,” she said to herself.

“Hum?”

“It appears I’ve inadvertently misled you, Brother Kabsal. I’m not associated with Brightness Jasnah. Not yet, anyway. I’ve been trying to get her to take me on as a ward.”

“Ah,” he said, finishing his lacquering.

“I’m sorry.”

“For what? You did nothing wrong.” He blew on the picture, then turned it for her to see. It was perfectly lacquered, without any smears. “If you would do me a favor, child?” he said, setting the page aside.

“Anything.”

He raised an eyebrow at that.

“Anything reasonable,” she corrected.

“By whose reason?”

“Mine, I guess.”

“Pity,” he said, standing. “Then I will limit myself. If you would kindly let Brightness Jasnah know that I called upon her?”

“She knows you?” What business had a Herdazian ardent with Jasnah, a confirmed atheist?

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that,” he replied. “I’d hope she’s heard my name, though, since I’ve requested an audience with her several times.”

Shallan nodded, rising. “You want to try to convert her, I presume?”

“She presents a unique challenge. I don’t think I could live with myself if I didn’t at least *try* to persuade her.”

“And we wouldn’t want you to be unable to live with yourself,” Shallan noted, “as the alternative harks back to your nasty habit of almost killing ardents.”

“Exactly. Anyway, I think a personal message from you might help where written requests have been ignored.”

“I . . . doubt that.”

“Well, if she refuses, it only means that I’ll be back.” He smiled. “That would mean—hopefully—that we shall meet each other again. So I look forward to it.”

“I as well. And I’m sorry again about the misunderstanding.”

“Brightness! Please. Don’t take responsibility for *my* assumptions.”

She smiled. “I should hesitate to take responsibility for you in *any* manner or regard, Brother Kabsal. But I still feel bad.”

“It will pass,” he noted, blue eyes twinkling. “But I’ll do my best to make you feel well again. Is there anything you’re fond of? Other than respecting ardents and drawing amazing pictures, that is?”

“Jam.”

He cocked his head.

“I like it,” she said, shrugging. “You asked what I was fond of. Jam.”

“So it shall be.” He withdrew into the dark corridor, fishing in his robe pocket for his sphere to give him light. In moments, he was gone.

Why didn’t he wait for Jasnah to return himself? Shallan shook her head, then lacquered her other two pictures. She had just finished letting them dry—packing them in her satchel—when she heard footsteps in the hallway again and recognized Jasnah’s voice speaking.

Shallan hurriedly gathered her things, leaving the letter on the desk, then stepped up to the side of the alcove to wait. Jasnah Kholin entered a moment later, accompanied by a small group of servants.

She did not look pleased.



“Victory! We stand atop the mount! We scatter them before us! Their homes become our dens, their lands are now our farms! And they shall burn, as we once did, in a place that is hollow and forlorn.”

—Collected on Ishashan, 1172, 18 seconds pre-death. Subject was a light-eyed spinster of the eighth dahn.

Shallan’s fears were confirmed as Jasnah looked straight at her, then lowered her safehand to her side in a mark of frustration. “So you *are* here.”

Shallan cringed. “The servants told you, then?”

“You didn’t think that they would leave someone in my alcove and not warn me?” Behind Jasnah, a small group of parshmen hesitated in the hallway, each carrying an armload of books.

“Brightness Kholin,” Shallan said. “I just—”

“I have wasted enough time on you already,” Jasnah said, eyes furious. “You will withdraw, Miss Davar. And I will not see you again during my time here. Am I *understood*?”

Shallan’s hopes crumbled. She shrank back. There was a gravity to Jasnah Kholin. One did not disobey her. One need only look into those eyes to understand.

“I’m sorry to have bothered you,” Shallan whispered, clutching her satchel and leaving with as much dignity as she could manage. She barely kept the tears of embarrassment and disappointment from her eyes as she hastened down the hallway, feeling like a complete fool.

She reached the porter’s shaft, though they had already returned below

after bringing up Jasnah. Shallan didn't pull the bell to summon them. Instead she placed her back to the wall and sank down to the floor, knees up against her chest, satchel in her lap. She wrapped her arms around her legs, freehand clasping her safehand through the fabric of her cuff, breathing quietly.

Angry people unsettled her. She couldn't help but think of her father in one of his tirades, couldn't help but hear screams, bellows, and whimpers. Was she weak because confrontation unsettled her so? She felt that she was.

Foolish, idiot girl, she thought, a few painspren crawling out of the wall near her head. *What made you think you could do this? You've only set foot off your family grounds a half-dozen times during your life. Idiot, idiot, idiot!*

She had persuaded her brothers to trust her, to put hope in her ridiculous plan. And now what had she done? Wasted six months during which their enemies circled closer.

"Brightness Davar?" asked a hesitant voice.

Shallan looked up, realizing she'd been so wrapped in her misery that she hadn't seen the servant approach. He was a younger man, wearing an all black uniform, no emblem on the breast. Not a master-servant, but perhaps one in training.

"Brightness Kholin would like to speak with you." The young man gestured back down the hallway.

To berate me further? Shallan thought with a grimace. But a highlady like Jasnah got what she wanted. Shallan forced herself to stop shaking, then stood. At least she'd been able to keep the tears away; she hadn't ruined her makeup. She followed the servant back to the lit alcove, satchel clutched before her like a shield on the battlefield.

Jasnah Kholin sat in the chair Shallan had been using, stacks of books on the table. Jasnah was rubbing her forehead with her freehand. The Soulcaster rested against the back of her skin, the smokestone dark and cracked. Though Jasnah looked fatigued, she sat with perfect posture, her fine silk dress covering her feet, her safehand held across her lap.

Jasnah focused on Shallan, lowering her freehand. "I should not have treated you with such anger, Miss Davar," she said in a tired voice. "You were simply showing persistence, a trait I normally encourage. Storms alight, I've oft been guilty of stubbornness myself. Sometimes we find it hardest to accept in others that which we cling to in ourselves. My only excuse can be that I have put myself under an unusual amount of strain lately."

Shallan nodded in gratitude, though she felt terribly awkward.

Jasnah turned to look out of the balcony into the dark space of the Veil.

128 "I know what people say of me. I should hope that I am not as harsh as

some say, though a woman could have far worse than a reputation for sternness. It can serve one well.”

Shallan had to forcibly keep herself from fidgeting. Should she withdraw?

Jasnah shook her head to herself, though Shallan could not guess what thoughts had caused the unconscious gesture. Finally, she turned back to Shallan and waved toward the large, gobletlike bowl on the desk. It held a dozen of Shallan’s spheres.

Shallan raised her freehand to her lips in shock. She’d completely forgotten the money. She bowed to Jasnah in thanks, then hurriedly collected the spheres. “Brightness, lest I forget, I should mention that an ardent—Brother Kabsal—came to see you while I waited here. He wished me to pass on his desire to speak with you.”

“Not surprising,” Jasnah said. “You seem surprised about the spheres, Miss Davar. I assumed that you were waiting outside to recover them. Is that not why you were so close?”

“No, Brightness. I was just settling my nerves.”

“Ah.”

Shallan bit her lip. The princess appeared to have gotten past her initial tirade. Perhaps . . . “Brightness,” Shallan said, cringing at her brashness, “what did you think of my letter?”

“Letter?”

“I . . .” Shallan glanced at the desk. “Beneath that stack of books, Brightness.”

A servant quickly moved aside the stack of books; the parshman must have set it on the paper without noticing. Jasnah picked up the letter, raising an eyebrow, and Shallan hurriedly undid her satchel and placed the spheres in her money pouch. Then she cursed herself for being so quick, as now she had nothing to do but stand and wait for Jasnah to finish reading.

“This is true?” Jasnah said, looking up from the paper. “You are self-trained?”

“Yes, Brightness.”

“That is remarkable.”

“Thank you, Brightness.”

“And this letter was a clever maneuver. You correctly assumed that I would respond to a written plea. This shows me your skill with words, and the rhetoric of the letter gives proof that you can think logically and make a good argument.”

“Thank you, Brightness,” Shallan said, feeling another surge of hope, mixed with fatigue. Her emotions had been jerked back and forth like a rope being used for a tugging contest.

“You should have left the note for me, and withdrawn before I returned.”

“But then the note would have been lost beneath that stack of books.”

Jasnah raised an eyebrow at her, as if to show that she did not appreciate being corrected. “Very well. The context of a person’s life *is* important. Your circumstances do not excuse your lack of education in history and philosophy, but leniency is in order. I will allow you to petition me again at a later date, a privilege I have never given any aspiring ward. Once you have a sufficient groundwork in those two subjects, come to me again. If you have improved suitably, I will accept you.”

Shallan’s emotions sank. Jasnah’s offer *was* kindly, but it would take years of study to accomplish what she asked. House Davar would have fallen by then, her family’s lands divided among its creditors, her brothers and herself stripped of title and perhaps enslaved.

“Thank you, Brightness,” Shallan said, bowing her head.

Jasnah nodded, as if considering the matter closed. Shallan withdrew, walking quietly down the hallway and pulling the cord to ring for the porters.

Jasnah had all but promised to accept her at a later date. For most, that would be a great victory. Being trained by Jasnah Kholin—thought by some to be the finest living scholar—would have ensured a bright future. Shallan would have married extremely well, likely to the son of a high-prince, and would have found new social circles open to her. Indeed, if Shallan had possessed the time to train under Jasnah, the sheer prestige of a Kholin affiliation might have been enough to save her house.

If only.

Eventually, Shallan made her way out of the Conclave; there were no gates on the front, just pillars set before the open maw. She was surprised to discover how dim it was outside. She trailed down the large steps, then took a smaller, more cultivated side path where she would be out of the way. Small shelves of ornamental shalebark had been grown along this walkway, and several species had let out fanlike tendrils to wave in the evening breeze. A few lazy lifespren—like specks of glowing green dust—flitted from one frond to the next.

Shallan leaned back against the stonelike plant, the tendrils pulling in and hiding. From this vantage, she could look down at Kharbranth, lights glowing beneath her like a cascade of fire streaming down the cliff face. The only other option for her and her brothers was to run. To abandon the family estates in Jah Keved and seek asylum. But where? Were there old allies her father *hadn’t* alienated?

There was that matter of the strange collection of maps they’d found in his study. What did they mean? He’d rarely spoken of his plans to his children. Even her father’s advisors knew very little. Helaran—her eldest brother—had known more, but he had vanished over a year ago, and her father had proclaimed him dead.

As always, thinking of her father made her feel ill, and the pain started to constrict her chest. She raised her freehand to her head, suddenly overwhelmed by the weight of House Davar's situation, her part in it, and the secret she now carried, hidden ten heartbeats away.

"Ho, young miss!" a voice called. She turned, shocked to see Yalb standing up on a rocky shelf a short distance from the Conclave entrance. A group of men in guard uniforms sat on the rock around him.

"Yalb?" she said, aghast. He should have returned to his ship hours ago. She hurried over to stand below the short stone outcropping. "Why are you still here?"

"Oh," he said, grinning, "I found myself a game of kabers here with these fine, upstanding gentlemen of the city guard. Figured officers of the law were right unlikely to cheat me, so we entered into a friendly-type game while I waited."

"But you didn't *need* to wait."

"Didn't need to win eighty chips off these fellows neither," Yalb said with a laugh. "But I did both!"

The men sitting around him looked far less enthusiastic. Their uniforms were orange tabards tied about the middle with white sashes.

"Well, I suppose I should be leading you back to the ship, then," Yalb said, reluctantly gathering up the spheres in the pile at his feet. They glowed with a variety of hues. Their light was small—each was only a chip—but it was impressive winnings.

Shallan stepped back as Yalb hopped off the rock shelf. His companions protested his departure, but he gestured to Shallan. "You'd have me leave a lighteyed woman of her stature to walk back to the ship on her own? I figured you for men of honor!"

That quieted their protests.

Yalb chuckled to himself, bowing to Shallan and leading her away down the path. He had a twinkle to his eyes. "Stormfather, but it's fun to win against lawmen. I'll have free drinks at the docks once this gets around."

"You shouldn't gamble," Shallan said. "You shouldn't try to guess the future. I didn't give you that sphere so you could waste it on such practices."

Yalb laughed. "It ain't gambling if you know you're going to win, young miss."

"You *cheated?*" she hissed, horrified. She glanced back at the guardsmen, who had settled down to continue their game, lit by the spheres on the stones before them.

"Not so loud!" Yalb said in a low voice. However, he seemed very pleased with himself. "Cheating four guardsmen, now that's a trick. Hardly believe I managed it!"

"I'm disappointed in you. This is *not* proper behavior."

“It is if you’re a sailor, young miss.” He shrugged. “It’s what they right expected from me. Watched me like handlers of poisonous skyeels, they did. The game wasn’t about the cards—it was about them trying to figure how I was cheating and me trying to figure how to keep them from hauling me off. I think I might not have managed to walk away with my skin if you hadn’t arrived!” That didn’t seem to worry him much.

The roadway down to the docks was not nearly as busy as it had been earlier, but there were still a surprisingly large number of people about. The street was lit by oil lanterns—spheres would just have ended up in someone’s pouch—but many of the people about carried sphere lanterns, casting a rainbow of colored light on the roadway. The people were almost like spren, each a different hue, moving this way or that.

“So, young miss,” Yalb said, leading her carefully through the traffic. “You really want to go back? I just said what I did so I could extract myself from that game there.”

“Yes, I do want to go back, please.”

“And your princess?”

Shallan grimaced. “The meeting was . . . unproductive.”

“She didn’t take you? What’s wrong with her?”

“Chronic competence, I should guess. She’s been so successful in life that she has unrealistic expectations of others.”

Yalb frowned, guiding Shallan around a group of revelers stumbling drunkenly up the roadway. Wasn’t it a little early for that sort of thing? Yalb got a few steps ahead, turning and walking backward, looking at her. “That doesn’t make sense, young miss. What more could she want than you?”

“Much more, apparently.”

“But you’re perfect! Pardon my forwardness.”

“You’re walking backward.”

“Pardon my backwardness, then. You look good from any side, young miss, that you do.”

She found herself smiling. Tozbek’s sailors had far too high an opinion of her.

“You’d make an ideal ward,” he continued. “Genteel, pretty, refined and such. Don’t much like your opinion on gambling, but that’s to be expected. Wouldn’t be right for a proper woman not to scold a fellow for gambling. It’d be like the sun refusing to rise or the sea turning white.”

“Or Jasnah Kholin smiling.”

“Exactly! Anyway, you’re perfect.”

“It’s kind of you to say so.”

“Well, it’s true,” he said, putting hands on hips, stopping. “So that’s it? You’re going to give up?”

132 She gave him a perplexed stare. He stood there on the busy roadway, lit

from above by a lantern burning yellow-orange, hands on his hips, white Thaylen eyebrows drooping along the sides of his face, bare-chested under his open vest. That was a posture no citizen, no matter how high ranked, had ever taken at her father's mansion.

"I *did* try to persuade her," Shallan said, blushing. "I went to her a second time, and she rejected me again."

"Two times, eh? In cards, you always got to try a third hand. It wins the most often."

Shallan frowned. "But that's not really true. The laws of probability and statistics—"

"Don't know much blustering math," Yalb said, folding his arms. "But I do know the Passions. You win when you need it most, you see."

The Passions. Pagan superstition. Of course, Jasnah had referred to glyphwards as superstition too, so perhaps it all came down to perspective.

Try a third time . . . Shallan shivered to consider Jasnah's wrath if Shal-lan bothered her yet again. She'd surely withdraw the offer to come study with her in the future.

But Shallan would never get to take that offer. It was like a glass sphere with no gemstone at the center. Pretty, but worthless. Was it not better to take one last chance at getting the position she needed *now*?

It wouldn't work. Jasnah had made it quite clear that Shallan was not yet educated enough.

Not yet educated enough . . .

An idea sparked in Shallan's head. She raised her safehand to her breast, standing on that roadway, considering the audacity of it. She'd likely get herself thrown from the city at Jasnah's demand.

Yet if she returned home without trying every avenue, could she face her brothers? They depended on her. For once in her life, someone *needed* Shallan. That responsibility excited her. And terrified her.

"I need a book merchant," she found herself saying, voice wavering slightly.

Yalb raised an eyebrow at her.

"Third hand wins the most. Do you think you can find me a book merchant who is open at this hour?"

"Kharbranth is a major port, young miss," he said with a laugh. "Stores stay open late. Just wait here." He dashed off into the evening crowd, leaving her with an anxious protest on her lips.

She sighed, then seated herself in a demure posture on the stone base of a lantern pole. It should be safe. She saw other lighteyed women passing on the street, though they were often carried in palanquins or those small, hand-pulled vehicles. She even saw the occasional real carriage, though only the very wealthy could afford to keep horses.

A few minutes later, Yalb popped out of the crowd as if from nowhere and waved for her to follow. She rose and hurried to him.

“Should we get a porter?” she asked as he led her to a large side street that ran laterally across the city’s hill. She stepped carefully; her skirt was long enough that she worried about tearing the hem on the stone. The strip at the bottom was designed to be easily replaced, but Shallan could hardly afford to waste spheres on such things.

“Nah,” Yalb said. “It’s right here.” He pointed along another cross street. This one had a row of shops climbing up the steep slope, each with a sign hanging out front bearing the glyphpair for *book*, and those glyphs were often styled into the shape of a book. Illiterate servants who might be sent to a shop had to be able to recognize them.

“Merchants of the same type like to clump together,” Yalb said, rubbing his chin. “Seems dumb to me, but I guess merchants are like fish. Where you find one, you’ll find others.”

“The same could be said of ideas,” Shallan said, counting. Six different shops. All were lit with Stormlight in the windows, cool and even.

“Third one on the left,” Yalb said, pointing. “Merchant’s name is Artmyrn. My sources say he’s the best.” It was a Thaylen name. Likely Yalb had asked others from his homeland, and they had pointed him here.

She nodded to Yalb and they climbed up the steep stone street to the shop. Yalb didn’t enter with her; she’d noticed that many men were uncomfortable around books and reading, even those who weren’t Vorin.

She pushed through the door—stout wood set with two crystal panels—and stepped into a warm room, uncertain what to expect. She’d never gone into a store to purchase anything; she’d either sent servants, or the merchants had come to her.

The room inside looked very inviting, with large, comfortable easy chairs beside a hearth. Flamespren danced on burning logs there, and the floor was wood. Seamless wood; it had probably been Soulcast that way directly from the stone beneath. Lavish indeed.

A woman stood behind a counter at the back of the room. She wore an embroidered skirt and blouse, rather than the sleek, silk, one-piece havah that Shallan wore. She was darkeyed, but she was obviously affluent. In Vorin kingdoms, she’d likely be of the first or second nahn. Thaylens had their own system of ranks. At least they weren’t completely pagan—they respected eye color, and the woman wore a glove on her safehand.

There weren’t many books in the place. A few on the counter, one on a stand beside the chairs. A clock ticked on the wall, its underside hung with a dozen shimmering silver bells. This looked more like a person’s home than a shop.

134 The woman slid a marker into her book, smiling at Shallan. It was a

smooth, eager smile. Almost predatory. “Please, Brightness, sit,” she said, waving toward the chairs. The woman had curled her long, white Thaylen eyebrows so they hung down the sides of her face like locks from her bangs.

Shallan sat hesitantly as the woman rang a bell on the underside of the counter. Soon, a portly man waddled into the room wearing a vest that seemed ready to burst from the stress of holding in his girth. His hair was greying, and he kept his eyebrows combed back, over his ears.

“Ah,” he said, clapping ample hands, “dear young woman. Are you in the market for a nice novel? Some leisure reading to pass the cruel hours while you are separated from a lost love? Or perhaps a book on geography, with details of exotic locations?” He had a slightly condescending tone and spoke in her native Veden.

“I— No, thank you. I need an extensive set of books on history and three on philosophy.” She thought back, trying to recall the names Jasnah had used. “Something by Placini, Gabrathin, Yustara, Manaline, or Shauka-daughter-Hasweth.”

“Heavy reading for one so young,” the man said, nodding to the woman, who was probably his wife. She ducked into the back room. He’d use her for reading; even if he could read himself, he wouldn’t want to offend customers by doing so in their presence. He would handle the money; commerce was a masculine art in most situations.

“Now, why is a young flower like yourself bothering herself with such topics?” the merchant said, easing himself down into the chair across from her. “Can’t I interest you in a nice romantic novel? They are my specialty, you see. Young women from across the city come to me, and I always carry the best.”

His tone set her on edge. It was galling enough to *know* she was a sheltered child. Was it really necessary to remind her of it? “A romantic novel,” she said, holding her satchel close to her chest. “Yes, perhaps that would be nice. Do you by chance have a copy of *Nearer the Flame*?”

The merchant blinked. *Nearer the Flame* was written from the viewpoint of a man who slowly descended into madness after watching his children starve.

“Are you certain you want something so, er, ambitious?” the man asked.

“Is ambition such an unseemly attribute in a young woman?”

“Well, no, I suppose not.” He smiled again—the thick, toothy smile of a merchant trying to put someone at ease. “I can see you are a woman of discriminating taste.”

“I am,” Shallan said, voice firm though her heart fluttered. Was she destined to get into an argument with everyone she met? “I *do* like my meals prepared very carefully, as my palate is quite delicate.”

“Pardon. I meant that you have discriminating taste *in books*.”

“I’ve never eaten one, actually.”

“Brightness, I believe you are having sport with me.”

“Not yet I’m not. I haven’t even really begun.”

“I—”

“Now,” she said, “you were right to compare the mind and the stomach.”

“But—”

“Too many of us,” she said, “take great pains with what we ingest through our mouths, and far less with what we partake of through our ears and eyes. Wouldn’t you say?”

He nodded, perhaps not trusting her to let him speak without interrupting. Shallan knew, somewhere in the back of her mind, that she was letting herself go too far—that she was tense and frustrated after her interactions with Jasnah.

She didn’t care at the moment. “Discriminating,” she said, testing the world. “I’m not certain I agree with your choice of words. To discriminate is to maintain prejudice against. To be exclusive. Can a person afford to be exclusive with what they ingest? Whether we speak of food or of thoughts?”

“I think they must be,” the merchant said. “Isn’t that what you just said?”

“I said we should take thought for what we read or eat. Not that we should be exclusive. Tell me, what do you think would happen to a person who ate only sweets?”

“I know well,” the man said. “I have a sister-in-law who periodically upsets her stomach by doing that.”

“See, she was *too* discriminating. The body needs many different foods to remain healthy. And the mind needs many different ideas to remain sharp. Wouldn’t you agree? And so if I were to read only these silly romances you presume that my ambition can handle, my mind would grow sick as surely as your sister-in-law’s stomach. Yes, I should think that the metaphor is a solid one. You are quite clever, Master Artmynr.”

His smile returned.

“Of course,” she noted, not smiling back, “being talked down to upsets both the mind *and* the stomach. So nice of you to give a poignant object lesson to accompany your brilliant metaphor. Do you treat all of your customers this way?”

“Brightness . . . I believe you stray into sarcasm.”

“Funny. I thought I’d run straight into it, screaming at the top of my lungs.”

He blushed and stood. “I’ll go help my wife.” He hurriedly withdrew.

She sat back, and realized she was annoyed at herself for letting her frustration boil out. It was just what her nurses had warned her about. A young woman had to mind her words. Her father’s intemperate tongue had earned their house a regrettable reputation; would she add to it?

She calmed herself, enjoying the warmth and watching the dancing flamespren until the merchant and his wife returned, bearing several stacks of books. The merchant took his seat again, and his wife pulled over a stool, setting the tomes on the floor and then showing them one at a time as her husband spoke.

“For history, we have two choices,” the merchant said, condescension—and friendliness—gone. “*Times and Passage*, by Rencalt, is a single volume survey of Rosharan history since the Hierocracy.” His wife held up a red, cloth-bound volume. “I told my wife that you would likely be insulted by such a shallow option, but she insisted.”

“Thank you,” Shallan said. “I am not insulted, but I do require something more detailed.”

“Then perhaps *Eternathis* will serve you,” he said as his wife held up a blue-grey set of four volumes. “It is a philosophical work which examines the same time period by focusing only on the interactions of the five Vorin kingdoms. As you can see, the treatment is exhaustive.”

The four volumes were thick. The *five* Vorin kingdoms? She’d thought there were four. Jah Keved, Alethkar, Kharbranth, and Natanatan. United by religion, they had been strong allies during the years following the Recreance. What was the fifth kingdom?

The volumes intrigued her. “I will take them.”

“Excellent,” the merchant said, a bit of the gleam returning to his eye. “Of the philosophical works you listed, we didn’t have anything by Yustara. We have one each of works by Placini and Manaline; both are collections of excerpts from their most famous writings. I’ve had the Placini book read to me; it’s quite good.”

Shallan nodded.

“As for Gabrathin,” he said, “we have four different volumes. My, but he was a prolific one! Oh, and we have a single book by Shauka-daughter-Hasweth.” The wife held up a thin green volume. “I have to admit, I’ve never had any of her work read to me. I didn’t realize that there were any Shin philosophers of note.”

Shallan looked at the four books by Gabrathin. She had no idea which one she should take, so she avoided the question, pointing at the two collections he had mentioned first and the single volume by Shauka-daughter-Hasweth. A philosopher from distant Shin, where people lived in mud and worshipped rocks? The man who had killed Jasnah’s father nearly six years before—prompting the war against the Parshendi in Natanatan—had been Shin. The Assassin in White, they called him.

“I will take those three,” Shallan said, “along with the histories.”

“Excellent!” the merchant repeated. “For buying so many, I will give you a fair discount. Let us say, ten emerald broams?”

Shallan nearly choked. An emerald broam was the largest denomination of sphere, worth a thousand diamond chips. Ten of them was more than her trip to Kharbranth had cost by several magnitudes!

She opened her satchel, looking in at her money pouch. She had around eight emerald broams left. She'd have to take fewer of the books, obviously, but which ones?

Suddenly, the door slammed open. Shallan jumped and was surprised to see Yalb standing there, holding his cap in his hands, nervous. He rushed to her chair, going down on one knee. She was too stunned to say anything. Why was he so worried?

"Brightness," he said, bowing his head. "My master bids you return. He's reconsidered his offer. Truly, we can take the price you offered."

Shallan opened her mouth, but found herself stupefied.

Yalb glanced at the merchant. "Brightness, don't buy from this man. He's a liar and a cheat. My master will sell you much finer books at a better price."

"Now, what's this?" Artmyrn said, standing. "How dare you! Who is your master?"

"Barmest," Yalb said defensively.

"That rat. He sends a boy into *my* shop trying to steal *my* customer? Outrageous!"

"She came to our shop first!" Yalb said.

Shallan finally recovered her wits. *Stormfather! He's quite the actor.* "You had your chance," she said to Yalb. "Run along and tell your master that I refuse to be swindled. I will visit every bookshop in the city if that is what it takes to find someone reasonable."

"Artmyrn isn't reasonable," Yalb said, spitting to the side. The merchant's eyes opened wide with rage.

"We shall see," Shallan said.

"Brightness," Artmyrn said, red-faced. "Surely you don't believe these allegations!"

"And how much were you going to charge her?" Yalb asked.

"Ten emerald broams," Shallan said. "For those seven books."

Yalb laughed. "And you didn't stand up and walk right out! You practically had my master's ears, and he offered you a better deal than that! Please, Brightness, return with me. We're ready to—"

"Ten was just an opening figure," Artmyrn said. "I didn't expect her to take them." He looked at Shallan. "Of course, *eight*. . . ."

Yalb laughed again. "I'm sure we have those same books, Brightness. I'll bet my master gives them to you for two."

Artmyrn grew more red-faced, muttering. "Brightness, surely you wouldn't

patronize someone so *crass* as to send a servant into someone else's shop to steal his customers!"

"Perhaps I would," Shallan said. "At least he didn't insult my intelligence."

Artmyrn's wife glared at her husband, and the man grew even more red in the face. "Two emerald, three sapphire. That is as low as I can go. If you want cheaper than that, then buy from that scoundrel Barmest. The books will probably be missing pages, though."

Shallan hesitated, glancing at Yalb; he was caught up in his role, bowing and scraping. She caught his eyes, and he just kind of gave a shrug.

"I'll do it," she said to Artmyrn, prompting a groan from Yalb. He slunk away with a curse from Artmyrn's wife. Shallan rose and counted out the spheres; the emerald brooms she retrieved from her safepouch.

Soon, she walked from the shop bearing a heavy canvas bag. She walked down the steep street, and found Yalb lounging beside a lamppost. She smiled as he took the bag from her. "How did you know what a fair price for a book was?" she asked.

"Fair price?" he said, slinging the bag over his shoulder. "For a book? I've no idea. I just figured he'd be trying to take you for as much as he could. That's why I asked around for who his biggest rival was and came back to help get him to be more reasonable."

"It was that obvious I'd let myself be swindled?" she asked with a blush, the two of them walking out of the side street.

Yalb chuckled. "Just a little. Anyway, conning men like him is almost as much fun as cheating guards. You probably could have gotten him down further by actually leaving with me, then coming back later to give him another chance."

"That sounds complicated."

"Merchants is like mercenaries, my gammer always said. Only difference is that merchants will take your head off, then pretend to be your friend all the same."

This from a man who had just spent the evening cheating a group of guards at cards. "Well, you have my thanks, anyway."

"Wasn't nothing. It was fun, though I can't believe you paid what you did. It's just a bunch of wood. I could find some driftwood and put some funny marks on it. Would you pay me pure spheres for that too?"

"I can't offer that," she said, fishing in her satchel. She took out the picture she'd drawn of Yalb and the porter. "But please, take this, with my thanks."

Yalb took the picture and stepped up beneath a nearby lantern to get a look. He laughed, cocking his head, smiling broadly. "Stormfather! Ain't

that something? Looks like I'm seeing myself in a polished plate, it does. I can't take this, Brightness!"

"Please. I insist." She did, however, blink her eyes, taking a Memory of him standing there, one hand on his chin as he studied the picture of himself. She'd redraw him later. After what he'd done for her, she dearly wanted him in her collection.

Yalb carefully tucked the picture between the pages of a book, then hefted the bag and continued. They stepped back onto the main roadway. Nomon—the middle moon—had begun to rise, bathing the city in pale blue light. Staying up this late had been a rare privilege for her in her father's house, but these city people around them barely seemed to notice the late hour. What a strange place this city was.

"Back to the ship now?" Yalb asked.

"No," Shallan said, taking a deep breath. "Back to the Conclave."

He raised an eyebrow, but led her back. Once there, she bid Yalb farewell, reminding him to take his picture. He did so, wishing her luck before hastening from the Conclave, probably worried about meeting the guardsmen he'd cheated earlier.

Shallan had a servant carry her books, and made her way down the hallway back to the Veil. Just inside the ornate iron doors, she caught the attention of a master-servant.

"Yes, Brightness?" the man asked. Most of the alcoves were now dim, and patient servants were returning tomes to their safe place beyond the crystal walls.

Shaking off her fatigue, Shallan counted up the rows. There was still a light in Jasnah's alcove. "I'd like to use the alcove there," she said, pointing to the next balcony over.

"Do you have a chit of admittance?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Then you'll have to rent the space if you wish to use it regularly. Two skymarks."

Wincing at the price, Shallan dug out the proper spheres and paid. Her money pouches were looking depressingly flat. She let the parshman porters haul her up to the appropriate level, then she quietly walked to her alcove. There, she used all her remaining spheres to fill the oversized goblet lamp. To get enough light, she was forced to use spheres of all nine colors and all three sizes, so the illumination was patchy and varied.

Shallan peeked over the side of her alcove, out at the next balcony over. Jasnah sat studying, heedless of the hour, her goblet filled to the brim with pure diamond broams. They were best for light, but less useful in Soulcasting, so weren't as valuable.

140 Shallan ducked back around. There was a place at the very edge of the

alcove's table where she could sit, hidden by the wall from Jasnah, so she sat there. Perhaps she should have chosen an alcove on another level, but she wanted to keep an eye on the woman. Hopefully Jasnah would spend weeks here studying. Enough time for Shallan to dedicate herself to some fierce cramming. Her ability to memorize pictures and scenes didn't work as well on text, but she could learn lists and facts at a rate that her tutors had found remarkable.

She settled herself in the chair, pulling out the books and arranging them. She rubbed her eyes. It was really quite late, but there wasn't time to waste. Jasnah had said that Shallan could make another petition when the gaps in her knowledge were filled. Well, Shallan intended to fill those gaps in record time, then present herself again. She'd do it when Jasnah was ready to leave Kharbranth.

It was a last, desperate hope, so frail that a strong gust of circumstance seemed likely to topple it. Taking a deep breath, Shallan opened the first of the history books.

"I'm never going to be rid of you, am I?" a soft, feminine voice asked.

Shallan jumped up, nearly knocking over her books as she spun toward the doorway. Jasnah Kholin stood there, deep blue dress embroidered in silver, its silken sheen reflecting the light of Shallan's spheres. The Soulcaster was covered by a fingerless black glove to block the bright gemstones.

"Brightness," Shallan said, rising and curtsying in an awkward rush. "I didn't mean to disturb you. I—"

Jasnah quieted her with a wave of the hand. She stepped aside as a parshman entered Shallan's alcove, carrying a chair. He placed it beside Shallan's desk, and Jasnah glided over and sat.

Shallan tried to judge Jasnah's mood, but the older woman's emotions were impossible to read. "I honestly didn't want to disturb you."

"I bribed the servants to tell me if you returned to the Veil," Jasnah said idly, picking up one of Shallan's tomes, reading the title. "I didn't want to be interrupted again."

"I—" Shallan looked down, blushing furiously.

"Don't bother apologizing," Jasnah said. She looked tired; more tired than Shallan felt. Jasnah picked through the books. "A fine selection. You chose well."

"It wasn't really much of a choice," Shallan said. "It was just about all the merchant had."

"You intended to study their contents quickly, I assume?" Jasnah said musingly. "Try to impress me one last time before I left Kharbranth?"

Shallan hesitated, then nodded.

"A clever ploy. I should have put a time restriction on your reapplication."

She looked at Shallan, glancing her over. "You are very determined. That is good. And I know why you wish so desperately to be my ward."

Shallan started. She *knew*?

"Your house has many enemies," Jasnah continued, "and your father is reclusive. It will be difficult for you to marry well without a tactically sound alliance."

Shallan relaxed, though she tried to keep it from showing.

"Let me see your satchel," Jasnah said.

Shallan frowned, resisting the urge to pull it close. "Brightness?"

Jasnah held out her hand. "You recall what I said about repeating myself?"

Reluctantly, Shallan handed it over. Jasnah carefully removed its contents, neatly lining up the brushes, pencils, pens, jar of lacquer, ink, and solvent. She placed the stacks of paper, the notebooks, and the finished pictures in a line. Then she got out Shallan's money pouches, noting their emptiness. She glanced at the goblet lamp, counting its contents. She raised an eyebrow.

Next, she began to look through Shallan's pictures. First the loose-leaf ones, where she lingered on Shallan's picture of Jasnah herself. Shallan watched the woman's face. Was she pleased? Surprised? Displeased at how much time Shallan spent sketching sailors and serving women?

Finally, Jasnah moved on to the sketchbook filled with drawings of plants and animals Shallan had observed during her trip. Jasnah spent the longest on this, reading through each notation. "Why have you made these sketches?" Jasnah asked at the end.

"Why, Brightness? Well, because I wanted to." She grimaced. Should she have said something profound instead?

Jasnah nodded slowly. Then she rose. "I have rooms in the Conclave, granted to me by the king. Gather your things and go there. You look exhausted."

"Brightness?" Shallan asked, rising, a thrill of excitement running through her.

Jasnah hesitated at the doorway. "At first meeting, I took you for a rural opportunist, seeking only to ride my name to greater wealth."

"You've changed your mind?"

"No," Jasnah said, "there is undoubtedly some of that in you. But we are each many different people, and you can tell much about a person by what they carry with them. If that notebook is any indication, you pursue scholarship in your free time for its own sake. That is encouraging. It is, perhaps, the best argument you could make on your own behalf.

"If I cannot be rid of you, then I might as well make use of you. Go and sleep. Tomorrow we will begin early, and you will divide your time between your education and helping me with my studies."

With that, Jasnah withdrew.

Shallan sat, bemused, blinking tired eyes. She got out a sheet of paper and wrote a quick prayer of thanks, which she'd burn later. Then she hurriedly gathered up her books and went looking for a servant to send to the *Wind's Pleasure* for her trunk.

It had been a very, *very* long day. But she'd won. The first step had been completed.

Now her real task began.

Chulls

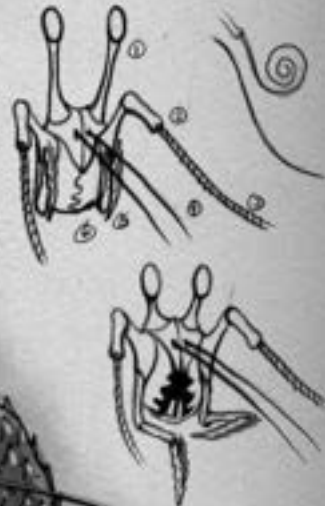
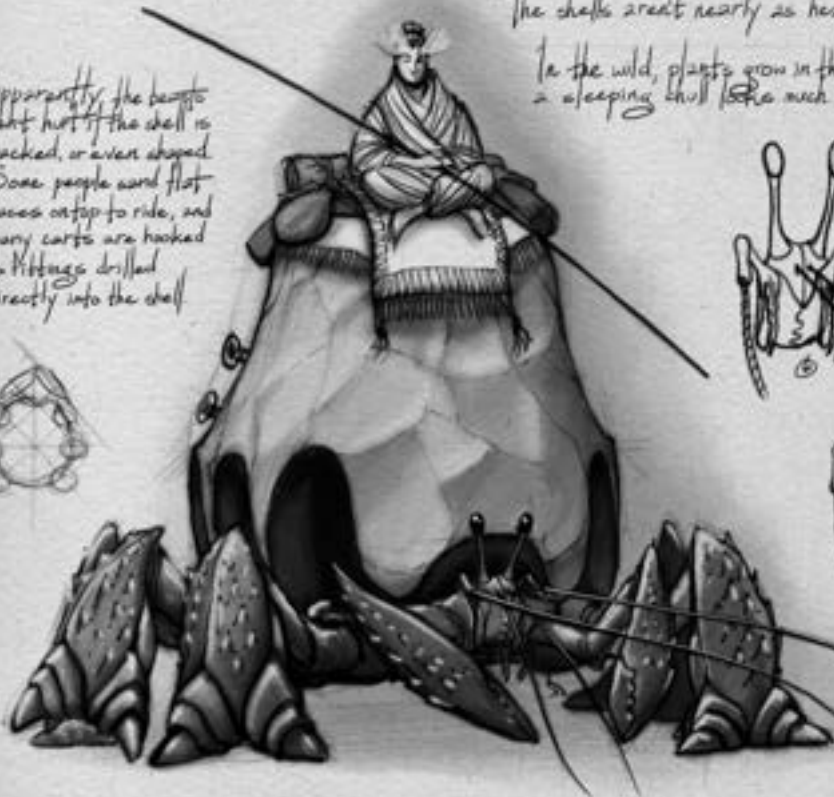
Chulls are everywhere, of course, and they come in a variety of shapes and sizes. There must be far more breeds of the animals than I'd originally assumed. I've seen them pulling carts, towing boxes, carrying loads of water in racks on their sides.

I even saw a man riding one for transportation, though it seems that walking would be far faster.



The chulls aren't nearly as heavy as they look. In the wild, plants grow in the crevices, and a sleeping chull looks much like a boulder.

Apparently, the beasts aren't hurt if the shell is cracked, or even shaped. Some people sand flat places on top to ride, and many carts are hooked to fittings drilled directly into the shell.



Many of the drivers here on the coast direct the animals by tapping on their antennae with a long pole, rather than using a complex leather bundle like the workers on my father's estate.





“Ten people, with Shardblades alight, standing before a wall of black and white and red.”

—Collected: Jesachev, 1173, 12 seconds pre-death. Subject: one of our own ardents, overheard during his last moments.

Kaladin had not been assigned to Bridge Four by chance. Out of all the bridge crews, Bridge Four had the highest casualty rate. That was particularly notable, considering that average bridge crews often lost one-third to one-half of their number on a single run.

Kaladin sat outside, back to the barrack wall, a sprinkle of rain falling on him. It wasn't a highstorm. Just an ordinary spring rain. Soft. A timid cousin to the great storms.

Syl sat on Kaladin's shoulder. Or hovered on it. Whatever. She didn't seem to have any weight. Kaladin sat slumped, chin against his chest, staring at a dip in the stone, which was slowly collecting rainwater.

He should have moved inside Bridge Four's barrack. It was cold and unfurnished, but it would keep off the rain. But he just . . . couldn't care. How long had he been with Bridge Four now? Two weeks? Three? An eternity?

Of the twenty-five men who had survived his first bridge deployment, twenty-three were now dead. Two had been moved to other bridge crews because they'd done something to please Gaz, but they'd died there. Only one other man and Kaladin remained. Two out of nearly forty.

The bridge crew's numbers had been replenished with more unfortunates, and most of those had died too. They had been replaced. Many of those

had died. Bridgeleader after bridgeleader had been chosen. It was supposed to be a favored position on a bridge crew, always getting to run in the best places. It didn't matter for Bridge Four.

Some bridge runs weren't as bad. If the Alethi arrived before the Parshendi, no bridgemen died. And if they arrived too late, sometimes another highprince was already there. Sadeas wouldn't help in that case; he'd take his army and go back to camp. Even in a bad run, the Parshendi would often choose to focus their arrows on certain crews, trying to bring them down one at a time. Sometimes, dozens of bridgemen would fall, but not a single one from Bridge Four.

That was rare. For some reason, Bridge Four always seemed to get targeted. Kaladin didn't bother to learn the names of his companions. None of the bridgemen did. What was the point? Learn a man's name, and one of you would be dead before the week was out. Odds were, you'd both be dead. Maybe he *should* learn names. Then he'd have someone to talk to in Damnation. They could reminisce about how terrible Bridge Four had been, and agree that eternal fires were much more pleasant.

He smirked dully, still staring at the rock in front of him. Gaz would come for them soon, send them to work. Scrubbing latrines, cleaning streets, mucking stables, gathering rocks. Something to keep their minds off their fate.

He still didn't know why they fought on those blustering plateaus. Something about those large chrysalises. They had gemstones at their hearts, apparently. But what did that have to do with the Vengeance Pact?

Another brigdeman—a youthful Veden with reddish-blond hair—lay nearby, staring up into the spitting sky. Rainwater pooled in the corners of his brown eyes, then ran down his face. He didn't blink.

They couldn't run. The warcamp might as well have been a prison. The bridgemen could go to the merchants and spend their meager earnings on cheap wine or whores, but they couldn't leave the warcamp. The perimeter was secure. Partially, this was to keep out soldiers from the other camps—there was always rivalry where armies met. But mostly it was so bridgemen and slaves could not flee.

Why? Why did this all have to be so horrible? None of it made *sense*. Why not let a few bridgemen run out in front of the bridges with shields to block arrows? He'd asked, and had been told that would slow them down too much. He'd asked again, and had been told he'd be strung up if he didn't shut his mouth.

The lighteyes acted as if this entire mess were some kind of grand game. If it was, the rules were hidden from bridgemen, just as pieces on a board had no inkling what the player's strategy might be.

"Kaladin?" Syl asked, floating down and landing on his leg, holding the

girlish form with the long dress flowing into mist. “Kaladin? You haven’t spoken in days.”

He kept staring, slumped. There *was* a way out. Bridgemen could visit the chasm nearest the camp. There were rules forbidding it, but the sentries ignored them. It was seen as the one mercy that could be given the bridgemen.

Bridgemen who took that path never returned.

“Kaladin?” Syl said, voice soft, worried.

“My father used to say that there are two kinds of people in the world,” Kaladin whispered, voice raspy. “He said there are those who take lives. And there are those who save lives.”

Syl frowned, cocking her head. This kind of conversation confused her; she wasn’t good with abstractions.

“I used to think he was wrong. I thought there was a third group. People who killed in order to save.” He shook his head. “I was a fool. There *is* a third group, a big one, but it isn’t what I thought.”

“What group?” she said, sitting down on his knee, brow scrunched up.

“The people who exist to be saved or to be killed. The group in the middle. The ones who can’t do anything but die or be protected. The victims. That’s all I am.”

He looked up across the wet lumberyard. The carpenters had retreated, throwing tarps over untreated wood and bearing away tools that could rust. The bridgeman barracks ran around the west and north sides of the yard. Bridge Four’s was set off a little from the others, as if bad luck were a disease that could be caught. Contagious by proximity, as Kaladin’s father would say.

“We exist to be killed,” Kaladin said. He blinked, glancing at the other few members of Bridge Four sitting apathetically in the rain. “If we’re not dead already.”



“I hate seeing you like this,” Syl said, buzzing about Kaladin’s head as his team of bridgemen dragged a log down into the lumberyard. The Parshendi often set fire to the outermost permanent bridges, so Highprince Sadeas’s engineers and carpenters were always busy.

The old Kaladin might have wondered why the armies didn’t work harder to defend the bridges. *There’s something wrong here!* a voice inside him said. *You’re missing part of the puzzle. They waste resources and bridgeman lives. They don’t seem to care about pushing inward and assaulting the Parshendi. They just fight pitched battles on plateaus, then come back to the camps and celebrate. Why? WHY?*

He ignored that voice. It belonged to the man he had been.

"You used to be vibrant," Syl said. "So many looked up to you, Kaladin. Your squad of soldiers. The enemies you fought. The other slaves. Even some lighteyes."

Lunch would come soon. Then he could sleep until their bridgeleader kicked him awake for afternoon duty.

"I used to watch you fight," Syl said. "I can barely remember it. My memories of then are fuzzy. Like looking at you through a rainstorm."

Wait. That was odd. Syl hadn't started following him until after his fall from the army. And she'd acted just like an ordinary windspren back then. He hesitated, earning a curse and a lash on his back from a taskmaster's whip.

He started pulling again. Bridgemen who were laggard in work were whipped, and bridgemen who were laggard on runs were executed. The army was very serious about that. Refuse to charge the Parshendi, try to lag behind the other bridges, and you'd be beheaded. They reserved that fate for that specific crime, in fact.

There were lots of ways to get punished as a bridgeman. You could earn extra work detail, get whipped, have your pay docked. If you did something really bad, they'd string you up for the Stormfather's judgment, leaving you tied to a post or a wall to face a highstorm. But the only thing you could do to be executed directly was refuse to run at the Parshendi.

The message was clear. Charging with your bridge *might* get you killed, but refusing to do so *would* get you killed.

Kaladin and his crew lifted their log into a pile with others, then unhooked their dragging lines. They walked back toward the edge of the lumberyard, where more logs waited.

"Gaz!" a voice called. A tall, yellow-and-black-haired soldier stood at the edge of the bridge grounds, a group of miserable men huddled behind him. That was Laresh, one of the soldiers who worked the duty tent. He brought new bridgemen to replace those who'd been killed.

The day was bright, without a hint of clouds, and the sun was hot on Kaladin's back. Gaz hustled up to meet the new recruits, and Kaladin and the others happened to be walking in that direction to pick up a log.

"What a sorry lot," Gaz said, looking over the recruits. "Of course, if they weren't, they wouldn't be sent *here*."

"That's the truth," Laresh said. "These ten at the front were caught smuggling. You know what to do."

New bridgemen were constantly needed, but there were always enough bodies. Slaves were common, but so were thieves or other lawbreakers from among the camp followers. Never parshmen. They were too valuable, and besides, the Parshendi were some kind of cousins to the parshmen. Better not to give the parshman workers in camp the sight of their kind fighting.

Sometimes a soldier would be thrown into a bridge crew. That only happened if he'd done something extremely bad, like striking an officer. Acts that would earn a hanging in many armies meant being sent to the bridge crews here. Supposedly, if you survived a hundred bridge runs, you'd be released. It had happened once or twice, the stories said. It was probably just a myth, intended to give the bridgemen some tiny hope for survival.

Kaladin and the others walked past the newcomers, gazes down, and began hooking their ropes to the next log.

"Bridge Four needs some men," Gaz said, rubbing his chin.

"Four always needs men," Laresh said. "Don't worry. I brought a special batch for it." He nodded toward a second group of recruits, much more ragtag, walking up behind.

Kaladin slowly stood upright. One of the prisoners in that group was a boy of barely fourteen or fifteen. Short, spindly, with a round face. "Tien?" he whispered, taking a step forward.

He stopped, shaking himself. Tien was dead. But this newcomer looked so familiar, with those frightened black eyes. It made Kaladin want to shelter the boy. Protect him.

But . . . he'd failed. Everyone he'd tried to protect—from Tien to Cenn—had ended up dead. What was the point?

He turned back to dragging the log.

"Kaladin," Syl said, landing on the log, "I'm going to leave."

He blinked in shock. Syl. Leave? But . . . she was the last thing he had left. "No," he whispered. It came out as a croak.

"I'll try to come back," she said. "But I don't know what will happen when I leave you. Things are strange. I have odd memories. No, most of them aren't even memories. Instincts. One of those tells me that if I leave you, I might lose myself."

"Then don't go," he said, growing terrified.

"I have to," she said, cringing. "I can't watch this anymore. I'll try to return." She looked sorrowful. "Goodbye." And with that, she zipped away into the air, adopting the form of a tiny group of tumbling, translucent leaves.

Kaladin watched her go, numb.

Then he turned back to hauling the log. What else could he do?



The youth, the one that reminded him of Tien, died during the very next bridge run.

It was a bad one. The Parshendi were in position, waiting for Sadeas. Kaladin charged the chasm, not even flinching as men were slaughtered

around him. It wasn't bravery that drove him; it wasn't even a wish that those arrows would take him and end it all. He ran. That was what he did. Like a boulder rolled down a hill, or like rain fell from the sky. They didn't have a choice. Neither did he. He wasn't a man; he was a thing, and things just did what they did.

The bridgemen laid their bridges in a tight line. Four crews had fallen. Kaladin's own team had lost nearly enough to stop them.

Bridge placed, Kaladin turned away, the army charging across the wood to start the real battle. He stumbled back across the plateau. After a few moments, he found what he was looking for. The boy's body.

Kaladin stood, wind whipping at his hair, looking down at the corpse. It lay faceup in a small hollow in the stone. Kaladin remembered lying in a similar hollow, holding a similar corpse.

Another bridgeman had fallen nearby, bristling with arrows. It was the man who'd lived through Kaladin's first bridge run all those weeks back. His body slumped to the side, lying on a stone outcropping a foot or so above the corpse of the boy. Blood dripped from the tip of an arrow sticking out his back. It fell, one ruby drop at a time, splattering on the boy's open, lifeless eye. A little trail of red ran from the eye down the side of his face. Like crimson tears.

That night, Kaladin huddled in the barrack, listening to a highstorm buffet the wall. He curled against the cold stone. Thunder shattered the sky outside.

I can't keep going like this, he thought. *I'm dead inside, as sure as if I'd taken a spear through the neck.*

The storm continued its tirade. And for the first time in over eight months, Kaladin found himself crying.



NINE YEARS AGO

Kal stumbled into the surgery room, the open door letting in bright white sunlight. At ten years old, he was already showing signs that he would be tall and lanky. He'd always preferred Kal to his full name, Kaladin. The shorter name made him fit in better. Kaladin sounded like a lighteyes's name.

"I'm sorry, Father," he said.

Kal's father, Lirin, carefully tightened the strap around the arm of the young woman who was tied onto the narrow operating table. Her eyes were closed; Kal had missed the administration of the drug. "We will discuss your tardiness later," Lirin said, securing the woman's other hand. "Close the door."

Kal cringed and closed the door. The windows were dark, shutters firmly in place, and so the only light was that of the Stormlight shining from a large globe filled with spheres. Each of those spheres was a broom, in total an incredible sum that was on permanent loan from Hearthstone's landlord. Lanterns flickered, but Stormlight was always true. That could save lives, Kal's father said.

Kal approached the table, anxious. The young woman, Sani, had sleek black hair, not tinged with even a single strand of brown or blond. She was fifteen, and her freehand was wrapped with a bloody, ragged bandage. Kal grimaced at the clumsy bandaging job—it looked like the cloth had been ripped from someone's shirt and tied in haste.

Sani's head rolled to the side, and she mumbled, drugged. She wore only a white cotton shift, her safehand exposed. Older boys in the town

sniggered about the chances they'd had—or *claimed* to have had—at seeing girls in their shifts, but Kal didn't understand what the excitement was all about. He *was* worried about Sani, though. He always worried when someone was wounded.

Fortunately, the wound didn't look terrible. If it had been life-threatening, his father would have already begun working on it, using Kal's mother—Hesina—as an assistant.

Lirin walked to the side of the room and gathered up a few small, clear bottles. He was a short man, balding despite his relative youth. He wore his spectacles, which he called the most precious gift he'd ever been given. He rarely got them out except for surgery, as they were too valuable to risk just wearing about. What if they were scratched or broken? Hearthstone was a large town, but its remote location in northern Alethkar would make replacing the spectacles difficult.

The room was kept neat, the shelves and table washed clean each morning, everything in its place. Lirin said you could tell a lot about a man from how he kept his workspace. Was it sloppy or orderly? Did he respect his tools or did he leave them casually about? The town's only fabrial clock sat here on the counter. The small device bore a single dial at the center and a glowing Smokestone at its heart; it had to be infused to keep the time. Nobody else in the town cared about minutes and hours as Lirin did.

Kal pulled over a stool to get a better vantage. Soon he wouldn't need the stool; he was growing taller by the day. He inspected Sani's hand. *She'll be all right*, he told himself, as his father had trained him. *A surgeon needs to be calm. Worry just wastes time.*

It was hard advice to follow.

"Hands," Lirin said, not turning away from gathering his tools.

Kal sighed, hopping off his stool and hurrying over to the basin of warm, soapy water by the door. "Why does it matter?" He wanted to be at work, helping Sani.

"Wisdom of the Heralds," Lirin said absently, repeating a lecture he'd given many times before. "Deathspren and rotspren hate water. It will keep them away."

"Hammie says that's silly," Kal said. "He says deathspren are mighty good at killing folk, so why should they be afraid of a little water?"

"The Heralds were wise beyond our understanding."

Kal grimaced. "But they're *demons*, father. I heard it off that ardent who came teaching last spring."

"That's the Radiants he spoke of," Lirin said sharply. "You're mixing them again."

Kal sighed.

"The Heralds were sent to teach mankind," Lirin said. "They led us

against the Voidbringers after we were cast from heaven. The Radiants were the orders of knights they founded.”

“Who were demons.”

“Who betrayed us,” Lirin said, “once the Heralds left.” Lirin raised a finger. “They were not demons, they were just men who had too much power and not enough sense. Either way, you are *always* to wash your hands. You can see the effect it has on rotspren with your own eyes, even if deathspren cannot be seen.”

Kal sighed again, but did as he was told. Lirin walked over to the table again, bearing a tray lined with knives and little glass bottles. His ways were odd—though Lirin made certain that his son didn’t mix up the Heralds and the Lost Radiants, Kal had heard his father say that he thought the Voidbringers weren’t real. Ridiculous. Who else could be blamed when things went missing in the night, or when a crop got infected with digger-worms?

The others in town thought Lirin spent too much time with books and sick people, and that made him strange. They were uncomfortable around him, and with Kal by association. Kal was only just beginning to realize how painful it could feel to be different.

Hands washed, he hopped back up onto the stool. He began to feel nervous again, hoping that nothing would go wrong. His father used a mirror to focus the spheres’ light onto Sani’s hand. Gingerly, he cut off the makeshift bandage with a surgeon’s knife. The wound wasn’t life-threatening, but the hand *was* pretty badly mangled. When his father had started training Kal two years before, sights like this had sickened him. Now he was used to torn flesh.

That was good. Kal figured this would be useful when he went to war someday, to fight for his highprince and the lighteyes.

Sani had three broken fingers and the skin on her hand was scraped and gouged, the wound cluttered with sticks and dirt. The third finger was the worst, shattered and twisted nastily, splinters of bone protruding through the skin. Kal felt its length, noting the fractured bones, the blackness on the skin. He carefully wiped away dried blood and dirt with a wet cloth, picking out rocks and sticks as his father cut thread for sewing.

“The third finger will have to go, won’t it?” Kal said, tying a bandage around the base of the finger to keep it from bleeding.

His father nodded, a hint of a smile on his face. He’d hoped Kal would discern that. Lirin often said that a wise surgeon must know what to remove and what to save. If that third finger had been set properly at first . . . but no, it was beyond recovery. Sewing it back together would mean leaving it to fester and die.

His father did the actual amputation. He had such careful, precise

hands. Training as a surgeon took over ten years, and it would be some time yet before Lirin let Kal hold the knife. Instead, Kal wiped away blood, handed his father knives, and held the sinew to keep it from tangling as his father sewed. They repaired the hand so far as they could, working with deliberate speed.

Kal's father finished the final suture, obviously pleased at having been able to save four of the fingers. That wasn't how Sani's parents would see it. They'd be disappointed that their beautiful daughter would now have a disfigured hand. It almost always happened that way—terror at the initial wound, then anger at Lirin's inability to work wonders. Lirin said it was because the townsfolk had grown accustomed to having a surgeon. To them, the healing had become an expectation, rather than a privilege.

But Sani's parents were good people. They'd make a small donation, and Kal's family—his parents, him, and his younger brother Tien—would continue to be able to eat. Odd, how they survived because of others' misfortune. Maybe that was part of what made the townsfolk resent them.

Lirin finished by using a small heated rod to cauterize where he felt the stitches wouldn't be enough. Finally, he spread pungent lister's oil across the hand to prevent infection—the oil frightened away rotspren even better than soap and water. Kal wrapped on clean bandages, careful not to disturb the splints.

Lirin disposed of the finger, and Kal began to relax. She'd be all right.

"You still need to work on those nerves of yours, son," Lirin said softly, washing blood from his hands.

Kal looked down.

"It is good to care," Lirin said. "But caring—like anything else—can be a problem if it interferes with your ability to perform surgery."

Caring too much can be a problem? Kal thought back at his father. *And what about being so selfless that you never charge for your work?* He didn't dare say the words.

Cleaning the room came next. It seemed like half of Kal's life was spent cleaning, but Lirin wouldn't let him go until they were done with it. At least he opened the shutters, letting sunlight stream in. Sani continued to doze; the winterwort would keep her unconscious for hours yet.

"So where were you?" Lirin asked, bottles of oil and alcohol clinking as he returned them to their places.

"With Jam."

"Jam is two years your senior," Lirin said. "I doubt he has much fondness for spending his time with those much younger than he."

"His father started training him in the quarterstaff," Kal said in a rush. "Tien and I went to see what he's learned." Kal cringed, waiting for the lecture.

His father just continued, wiping down each of his surgeon's knives with alcohol, then oil, as the old traditions dictated. He didn't turn toward Kal.

"Jam's father was a soldier in Brightlord Amaram's army," Kal said tentatively. Brightlord Amaram! The noble lighteyed general who watched over northern Alethkar. Kal wanted so much to see a *real* lighteyes, not stuffy old Wistiow. A soldier, like everyone talked about, like the stories were about.

"I know about Jam's father," Lirin said. "I've had to operate on that lame leg of his three times now. A gift of his glorious time as a soldier."

"We *need* soldiers, father. You'd have our borders violated by the Thaylens?"

"Thaylenah is an island kingdom," Lirin said calmly. "They don't share a border with us."

"Well, then, they could attack from the sea!"

"They're mostly tradesmen and merchants. Every one I've met has tried to swindle me, but that's hardly the same thing as invading."

All the boys liked to tell stories about far-off places. It was hard to remember that Kal's father—the only man of second nahn in the town—had traveled all the way to Kharbranth during his youth.

"Well, we fight with *someone*," Kal continued, moving to scrub the floor.

"Yes," his father said after a pause. "King Gavilar always finds people for us to fight. That much is true."

"So we need soldiers, like I said."

"We need surgeons more." Lirin sighed audibly, turning away from his cabinet. "Son, you nearly cry each time someone is brought to us; you grind your teeth anxiously during even simple procedures. What makes you think you could actually *hurt* someone?"

"I'll get stronger."

"That's foolishness. Who's put these ideas in your head? *Why* would you want to learn to hit other boys with a stick?"

"For honor, Father," Kal said. "Who tells stories about *surgeons*, for the Heralds' sake!"

"The children of the men and women whose lives we save," Lirin said evenly, meeting Kal's gaze. "That's who tell stories of surgeons."

Kal blushed and shrank back, then finally returned to his scrubbing.

"There are two kinds of people in this world, son," his father said sternly. "Those who save lives. And those who take lives."

"And what of those who protect and defend? The ones who save lives *by* taking lives?"

His father snorted. "That's like trying to stop a storm by blowing harder. Ridiculous. You can't protect by killing."

Kal kept scrubbing.

Finally, his father sighed, walking over and kneeling down beside him, helping with the scrubbing. “What are the properties of winterwort?”

“Bitter taste,” Kal said immediately, “which makes it safer to keep, since people won’t eat it by accident. Crush it to powder, mix it with oil, use one spoonful per ten brickweight of the person you’re drugging. Induces a deep sleep for about five hours.”

“And how can you tell if someone has the fiddlepox?”

“Nervous energy,” Kal said, “thirst, trouble sleeping, and swelling on the undersides of the arms.”

“You’ve got such a good mind, son,” Lirin said softly. “It took me years to learn what you’ve done in months. I’ve been saving. I’d like to send you to Kharbranth when you turn sixteen, to train with real surgeons.”

Kal felt a spike of excitement. Kharbranth? That was in an entirely different kingdom! Kal’s father had traveled there as a courier, but he hadn’t trained there as a surgeon. He’d learned from old Vathe in Shorsebrook, the nearest town of any size.

“You have a gift from the Heralds themselves,” Lirin said, resting a hand on Kal’s shoulder. “You could be ten times the surgeon I am. Don’t dream the small dreams of other men. Our grandfathers bought and worked us to the second nahn so that we could have full citizenship and the right of travel. Don’t waste that on killing.”

Kal hesitated, but soon found himself nodding.



“Three of sixteen ruled, but now the Broken One reigns.”

—Collected: Chachanan, 1173, 84 seconds pre-death. Subject: a cutpurse with the wasting sickness, of partial Iriali descent.

The highstorm eventually subsided. It was the dusk of the day the boy had died, the day Syl had left him. Kaladin slid on his sandals—the same ones he’d taken from the leathery-faced man on that first day—and stood up. He walked through the crowded barrack.

There were no beds, just one thin blanket per bridgeman. One had to choose whether to use it for cushioning or warmth. You could freeze or you could ache. Those were a bridgeman’s options, though several of the bridgemen had found a third use for the blankets. They wrapped them around their heads, as if to block out sight, sound, and smell. To hide from the world.

The world would find them anyway. It was good at these kinds of games.

Rain fell in sheets outside, the wind still stiff. Flashes lit the western horizon, where the center of the storm flew onward. This was an hour or so before the riddens, and was as early as one would want to go out in a highstorm.

Well, one never *wanted* to go out in a highstorm. But this was about as early as it was *safe* to go out. The lightning had passed; the winds were manageable.

He passed through the dim lumberyard, hunched against the wind. Branches lay scattered about like bones in a whitespine’s lair. Leaves were

plastered by rainwater to the rough sides of barracks. Kaladin splashed through puddles that chilled and numbed his feet. That felt good; they were still sore from the bridge run earlier.

Waves of icy rain blew across him, wetting his hair, dripping down his face and into his scruffy beard. He hated having a beard, particularly the way the whiskers itched at the corners of his mouth. Beards were like axe-hound pups. Boys dreamed of the day they'd get one, never realizing how annoying they could be.

"Out for a stroll, Your Lordship?" a voice said.

Kaladin looked up to find Gaz huddled in a nearby hollow between two of the barracks. Why was he out in the rain?

Ah. Gaz had fastened a small metal basket on the leeward wall of one of the barracks, and a soft glowing light came from within. He left his spheres out in the storm, then had come out early to retrieve them.

It was a risk. Even a sheltered basket could get torn free. Some people believed that the shades of the Lost Radiants haunted the storms, stealing spheres. Perhaps that was true. But during his time in the army, Kaladin had known more than one man who had been wounded sneaking around during full storm, looking for spheres. No doubt the superstition was due to more worldly thieves.

There were safer ways to infuse spheres. Moneychangers would exchange dun spheres for infused ones, or you could pay them to infuse yours in one of their safely guarded nests.

"What are you doing?" Gaz demanded. The short, one-eyed man clutched the basket to his chest. "I'll have you strung up if you've stolen anyone's spheres."

Kaladin turned away from him.

"Storm you! I'll have you strung up anyway! Don't think you can run away; there are still sentries. You—"

"I'm going to the Honor Chasm," Kaladin said quietly. His voice would barely be audible over the storm.

Gaz shut up. The Honor Chasm. He lowered his metal basket and made no further objections. There was a certain deference given to men who took that road.

Kaladin continued to cross the courtyard.

"Lordling," Gaz called.

Kaladin turned.

"Leave the sandals and vest," Gaz said. "I don't want to have to send someone down to fetch them."

Kaladin pulled the leather vest over his head and dropped it to the ground with a splash, then left the sandals in a puddle. That left him in a dirty shirt and stiff brown trousers, both taken off a dead man.

Kaladin walked through the storm to the east side of the lumberyard. A low thundering rumbled from the west. The pathway down to the Shattered Plains was familiar to him now. He'd run this way a dozen times with the bridge crews. There wasn't a battle every day—perhaps one in every two or three—and not every bridge crew had to go on every run. But many of the runs were so draining, so horrific, that they left the bridgemen stunned, almost unresponsive, for the days between.

Many bridgemen had trouble making decisions. The same happened to men who were shocked by battle. Kaladin felt those effects in himself. Even deciding to come to the chasm had been difficult.

But the bleeding eyes of that unnamed boy haunted him. He wouldn't make himself go through something like that again. He *couldn't*.

He reached the base of the slope, wind-driven rain pelting his face as if trying to shove him back toward the camp. He kept on, walking up to the nearest chasm. The Honor Chasm, the bridgemen called it, for it was the place where they could make the one decision left to them. The “honorable” decision. Death.

They weren't natural, these chasms. This one started narrow, but as it ran toward the east, it grew wider—and deeper—incredibly quickly. At only ten feet long, the crack was already wide enough that it would be difficult to jump. A group of six rope ladders with wooden rungs hung here, affixed to spikes in the rock, used by bridgemen sent down to salvage from corpses that had fallen into the chasms during bridge runs.

Kaladin looked out over the plains. He couldn't see much through the darkness and rain. No, this place wasn't natural. The land had been broken. And now it broke the people who came to it. Kaladin walked past the ladders, a little farther along the edge of the chasm. Then he sat down, legs over the side, looking down as the rain fell around him, the droplets plunging into the dark depths.

To his sides, the more adventurous cremlings had already left their lairs, scuttling about, feeding on plants that lapped up the rainwater. Lirin had once explained that highstorm rains were rich with nutrients. Stormwardens in Kholinar and Vedenar had proven that plants given storm water did better than those given lake or river water. Why was it that scientists were so excited to discover facts that farmers had known for generations and generations?

Kaladin watched the drops of water streaking down toward oblivion in the crevasse. Little suicidal jumpers. Thousands upon thousands of them. Millions upon millions. Who knew what awaited them in that darkness? You couldn't see it, couldn't know it, until you joined them. Leaping off into the void and letting the wind bear you down . . .

“You were right, Father,” Kaladin whispered. “You can't stop a storm by

blowing harder. You can't save men by killing others. We should all become surgeons. Every last one of us. . . ."

He was rambling. But, oddly, his mind felt clearer now than it had in weeks. Perhaps it was the clarity of perspective. Most men spent their entire lives wondering about the future. Well, his future was empty now. So he turned backward, thinking about his father, about Tien, about decisions.

Once, his life had seemed simple. That was before he'd lost his brother, before he'd been betrayed in Amaram's army. Would Kaladin go back to those innocent days, if he could? Would he prefer to pretend everything was simple?

No. He'd had no easy fall, like those drops. He'd earned his scars. He'd bounced off walls, bashed his face and hands. He'd killed innocent men by accident. He'd walked beside those with hearts like blackened coals, adoring them. He'd scrambled and climbed and fallen and stumbled.

And now here he was. At the end of it all. Understanding so much more, but somehow feeling no wiser. He climbed to his feet on the lip of that chasm, and could feel his father's disappointment looming over him, like the thunderheads above.

He put one foot out over the void.

"Kaladin!"

He froze at the soft but piercing voice. A translucent form bobbed in the air, approaching through the weakening rain. The figure lunged forward, then sank, then surged higher again, like it was bearing something heavy. Kaladin brought his foot back and held out his hand. Syl unceremoniously alighted upon it, shaped like a skyeel clutching something dark in its mouth.

She switched to the familiar form of a young woman, dress fluttering around her legs. She held in her hands a narrow, dark green leaf with a point divided in three. Blackbane.

"What is this?" Kaladin asked.

She looked exhausted. "These things are heavy!" She lifted the leaf. "I brought it for you!"

He took the leaf between two fingers. Blackbane. Poison. "Why did you bring this to me?" he said harshly.

"I thought . . ." Syl said, shying back. "Well, you kept those other leaves so carefully. Then you lost them when you tried to help that man in the slave cages. I thought it would make you happy to have another one."

Kaladin almost laughed. She had no concept of what she'd done, fetching him a leaf of one of Roshar's most deadly natural poisons because she'd wanted to make him happy. It was ridiculous. And sweet.

"Everything seemed to go wrong when you lost that leaf," Syl said in a soft voice. "Before that, you fought."

“I failed.”

She cowered down, kneeling on his palm, misty skirt around her legs, drops of rainwater passing through her and rippling her form. “You don’t like it then? I flew so far . . . I almost forgot myself. But I came back. I came *back*, Kaladin.”

“Why?” he pled. “Why do you care?”

“Because I do,” she said, cocking her head. “I watched you, you know. Back in that army. You’d always find the young, untrained men and protect them, even though it put you into danger. I can remember. Just barely, but I do.”

“I failed them. They’re dead now.”

“They would have died more quickly without you. You made it so they had a family in the army. I remember their gratitude. It’s what drew me in the first place. You helped them.”

“No,” he said, clutching the blackbane in his fingers. “Everything I touch withers and dies.” He teetered on the ledge. Thunder rumbled in the distance.

“Those men in the bridge crew,” Syl whispered. “You could help them.”

“Too late.” He closed his eyes, thinking of the dead boy earlier in the day. “It’s too late. I’ve failed. They’re dead. They’re all going to die, and there’s no way out.”

“What is one more try, then?” Her voice was soft, yet somehow stronger than the storm. “What could it hurt?”

He paused.

“You can’t fail this time, Kaladin. You’ve said it. They’re all going to die anyway.”

He thought of Tien, and his dead eyes staring upward.

“I don’t know what you mean most of the time when you speak,” she said. “My mind is so cloudy. But it seems that if you’re worried about hurting people, you shouldn’t be afraid to help the bridgemen. What more could you do to them?”

“I . . .”

“One more try, Kaladin,” Syl whispered. “Please.”

One more try. . . .

The men huddled in the barrack with barely a blanket to call their own. Frightened of the storm. Frightened of each other. Frightened of what the next day would bring.

One more try. . . .

He thought of himself, crying at the death of a boy he hadn’t known. A boy he hadn’t even tried to help.

One more try.

Kaladin opened his eyes. He was cold and wet, but he felt a tiny, warm

candle flame of determination come alight inside him. He clenched his hand, crushing the blackbane leaf inside, then dropped it over the side of the chasm. He lowered the other hand, which had been holding Syl.

She zipped up into the air, anxious. “Kaladin?”

He stalked away from the chasm, bare feet splashing in puddles and stepping heedlessly on rockbud vines. The incline he’d come down was covered with flat, slatelike plants that had opened like books to the rain, ruffled lacy red and green leaves connecting the two halves. Lifespren—little green blips of light, brighter than Syl but small as spores—danced among the plants, dodging raindrops.

Kaladin strode up, water streaming past him in tiny rivers. At the top, he returned to the bridge yard. It was still empty save for Gaz, who was tying a ripped tarp back into place.

Kaladin had crossed most of the distance to the man before Gaz noticed him. The wiry sergeant scowled. “Too cowardly to go through with it, Your Lordship? Well, if you think I’m giving back—”

He cut off with a gagging noise as Kaladin lunged forward, grabbing Gaz by the neck. Gaz lifted an arm in surprise, but Kaladin batted it away and swept the man’s legs out from under him, slamming him down to the rocky ground, throwing up a splash of water. Gaz’s eye opened wide with shock and pain, and he began to strangle under the pressure of Kaladin’s grip on his throat.

“The world just changed, Gaz,” Kaladin said, leaning in close. “I died down at that chasm. Now you’ve got my vengeful spirit to deal with.”

Squirming, Gaz looked about frantically for help that wasn’t there. Kaladin didn’t have trouble holding him down. There was one thing about running bridges: If you survived long enough, it built up the muscles.

Kaladin let up slightly on Gaz’s neck, allowing him a gasping breath. Then Kaladin leaned down further. “We’re going to start over new, you and I. Clean. And I want you to understand something from the start. I’m *already* dead. You can’t hurt me. Understand?”

Gaz nodded slowly and Kaladin gave him another breath of frigid, humid air.

“Bridge Four is mine,” Kaladin said. “You can assign us tasks, but I’m bridgeleader. The other one died today, so you have to pick a new leader anyway. Understand?”

Gaz nodded again.

“You learn quickly,” Kaladin said, letting the man breathe freely. He stepped back, and Gaz hesitantly got to his feet. There was hatred in his eyes, but it was veiled. He seemed worried about something—something more than Kaladin’s threats.

“I want to stop paying down my slave debt,” Kaladin said. “How much do bridgemen make?”

“Two clearmarks a day,” Gaz said, scowling at him and rubbing his neck.

So a slave would make half that. One diamond mark. A pittance, but Kaladin would need it. He’d also need to keep Gaz in line. “I’ll start taking my wages,” Kaladin said, “but you get to keep one mark in five.”

Gaz started, glancing at him in the dim, overcast light.

“For your efforts,” Kaladin said.

“For what efforts?”

Kaladin stepped up to him. “Your efforts in staying the *Damnation* out of my way. Understood?”

Gaz nodded again. Kaladin walked away. He hated to waste money on a bribe, but Gaz needed a consistent, repetitive reminder of why he should avoid getting Kaladin killed. One mark every five days wasn’t much of a reminder—but for a man who was willing to risk going out in the middle of a highstorm to protect his spheres, it might be enough.

Kaladin walked back to Bridge Four’s small barrack, pulling open the thick wooden door. The men huddled inside, just as he’d left them. But something had changed. Had they always looked that pathetic?

Yes. They had. Kaladin was the one who had changed, not they. He felt a strange dislocation, as if he’d allowed himself to forget—if only in part—the last nine months. He reached back across time, studying the man he had been. The man who’d still fought, and fought well.

He couldn’t be that man again—he couldn’t erase the scars—but he could *learn* from that man, as a new squadleader learned from the victorious generals of the past. Kaladin Stormblessed was dead, but Kaladin Bridgeman was of the same blood. A descendant with potential.

Kaladin walked to the first huddled figure. The man wasn’t sleeping—who could sleep through a highstorm? The man cringed as Kaladin knelt beside him.

“What’s your name?” Kaladin asked, Syl flitting down and studying the man’s face. He wouldn’t be able to see her.

The man was older, with drooping cheeks, brown eyes, and close-cropped, white-salted hair. His beard was short and he didn’t have a slave mark.

“Your name?” Kaladin repeated firmly.

“Storm off,” the man said, rolling over.

Kaladin hesitated, then leaned in, speaking in a low voice. “Look, friend. You can either tell me your name, or I’ll keep pestering you. Continue refusing, and I’ll tow you out into that storm and hang you over the chasm by one leg until you tell me.”

The man glanced back over his shoulder. Kaladin nodded slowly, holding the man's gaze.

"Teft," the man finally said. "My name's Teft."

"That wasn't so hard," Kaladin said, holding out his hand. "I'm Kaladin. Your bridgeleader."

The man hesitated, then took Kaladin's hand, wrinkling his brow in confusion. Kaladin vaguely remembered the man. He'd been in the crew for a while, a few weeks at least. Before that, he'd been on another bridge crew. One of the punishments for bridgemen who committed camp infractions was a transfer to Bridge Four.

"Get some rest," Kaladin said, releasing Teft's hand. "We're going to have a hard day tomorrow."

"How do you know?" Teft asked, rubbing his bearded chin.

"Because we're bridgemen," Kaladin said, standing. "*Every* day is hard."

Teft hesitated, then smiled faintly. "Kelek knows that's true."

Kaladin left him, moving down the line of huddled figures. He visited each man, prodding or threatening until the man gave his name. They each resisted. It was as if their names were the last things they owned, and wouldn't be given up cheaply, though they seemed surprised—perhaps even encouraged—that someone cared to ask.

He clutched to these names, repeating each one in his head, holding them like precious gemstones. The names mattered. The men mattered. Perhaps Kaladin would die in the next bridge run, or perhaps he would break under the strain, and give Amaram one final victory. But as he settled down on the ground to plan, he felt that tiny warmth burning steadily within him.

It was the warmth of decisions made and purpose seized. It was responsibility.

Syl alighted on his leg as he sat, whispering the names of the men to himself. She looked encouraged. Bright. Happy. He didn't feel any of that. He felt grim, tired, and wet. But he wrapped himself in the responsibility he had taken, the responsibility for these men. He held to it like a climber clung to his last handhold as he dangled from a cliff side.

He *would* find a way to protect them.

THE END OF

Part One