

TOWERS OF MIDNIGHT

The background of the cover is a detailed illustration. It depicts three characters in a dark, forested setting. On the left, an older man with white hair and a blue coat holds a large, gnarled staff. In the center, a younger man in a green tunic and brown hat looks towards the right. On the right, an older man with white hair and a yellow and green patterned tunic points upwards with a long, thin object. A bright, glowing light emanates from the top right, illuminating the scene. The ground is covered in fallen leaves and twigs.

Book Thirteen
of
*THE WHEEL
OF TIME*®

Sequel
to the #1
*New York
Times
Bestseller
The
Gathering
Storm*

Robert Jordan
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Pre-sale Content Release Schedule

(Content will be available in PDF format, and audio will be available via MP3.)

Available Now: Chapter 1, "Apples First"

October 26: Chapter 2, "Questions of Leadership" (Audio)



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TOWERS OF MIDNIGHT

A large, stylized handwritten signature of Robert Jordan, written in black ink. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial 'R' and a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

ROBERT JORDAN
AND
BRANDON SANDERSON



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
NEW YORK

THE WHEEL OF TIME®

by Robert Jordan

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Crossroads of Twilight

Knife of Dreams

by Robert Jordan
and Brandon Sanderson

The Gathering Storm

Towers of Midnight

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

TOWERS OF MIDNIGHT

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CHAPTER

1



Apples First

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

Crisp and light, the wind danced across fields of new mountain grass stiff with frost. That frost lingered past first light, sheltered by the omnipresent clouds that hung like a death mask high above. It had been weeks since those clouds had budged, and the wan, yellowed grass showed it.

The wind churned morning mist, moving southward, chilling a small pride of torm. They reclined on a flat, lichen-stained granite shelf, waiting to bask in morning sunlight that would not arrive. The wind poured over the shelf, racing down a hillside of scraggly mura trees, with ropelike bark and green tufts of thick, needlelike leaves atop them.

At the base of the foothills, the wind turned eastward, passing an open plain kept free of trees and scrub by the soldier's axe. The killing field surrounded thirteen fortresses, tall and cut entirely from unpolished black marble, their blocks left rough-hewn to give them a primal feeling of unformed strength. These were towers meant for war. By tradition they were unoccupied. How long that would last—how long tradition

itself would be remembered in a continent in chaos—remained to be seen.

The wind continued eastward, and soon it was playing with the masts of half-burned ships at the docks of Takisrom. Out into the Sleeping Bay, it passed the attackers: enormous greatships with sails painted blood red. They sailed southward, their grisly work done.

The wind blew onto land again, past smoldering towns and villages, open plains filled with troops and docks fat with warships. Smoke, war calls and banners flew above dying grass and beneath a dockmaster's gloomy sky.

Men did not whisper that this might be the end of times. They yelled it. The Fields of Peace were aflame, the Tower of Ravens was broken as prophesied and a murderer openly ruled in Seandar. This was a time to lift one's sword and choose a side, then spill blood to give a final color to the dying land.

The wind howled eastward over the famed Emerald Cliffs and coursed out over the ocean. Behind, smoke seemed to rise from the entire continent of Seanchan.

For hours, the wind blew—making what would have been called tradewinds in another Age—twisting between whitecaps and dark, mysterious waves. Eventually, the wind encountered another continent, this one quiet, like a man holding his breath before the headsman's axe fell.

By the time the wind reached the enormous, broken-peaked mountain known as Dragonmount, it had lost much of its strength. It passed around the base of the mountain, then through a large orchard of apple trees, lit by early-afternoon sunlight. The once-green leaves had faded to yellow.

The wind passed by a low wooden fence, tied at its joints with tan linen twine. Two figures stood there: a youth and a somber man in his later years. The older man wore a pair of worn brown trousers and a loose white shirt with wooden buttons. His face was so furrowed with wrinkles that it seemed kin to the bark of the trees.

Almen Bunt didn't know a lot about orchards. Oh, he had planted a few trees back on his farm in Andor. Who didn't have a tree or two to fill in space on the dinner table? He'd planted a pair of walnut trees on the day he'd married Adrinne. It had felt good to have her trees there, outside his window, after she'd died.

Running an orchard was something else entirely. There were nearly three hundred trees in this field. It was his sister's orchard; he was visiting while his sons managed his farm near Carysford.

In his shirt pocket, Almen carried a letter from his sons. A desperate letter, pleading for help, but he couldn't go to them. He was needed here.

Besides, it was a good time for him to be out of Andor. He was a Queen's man. There had been times, recently, when being a Queen's man could get someone into as much trouble as having one too many cows in his pasture.

"What do we do, Almen?" Adim asked. "Those trees, they . . . Well, it *ain't* supposed to happen like this." The boy of thirteen had golden hair from his father's side.

Almen rubbed his chin, scratching at a patch of whiskers he'd missed during shaving. Hahn, Adim's older brother, approached them. The lad had carved Almen a set of wooden teeth as an arrival gift earlier in the spring. Wondrous things, held together by wires, with gaps for the few remaining teeth he had. But if he chewed too hard, they'd go all out of shape.

The rows of trees were straight and perfectly spaced. Graeger—Almen's brother-in-law—always *had* been meticulous. But he was dead now, which was why Almen had come. The neat rows of trees continued on for spans and spans, carefully pruned, fertilized, and watered.

And during the night, every single one of them had shed their fruit. Tiny apples, barely as large as a man's thumb. Thousands of them. They'd shriveled during the night, then fallen. An entire crop, gone.

"I don't know what to say, lads," Almen finally admitted.

"You, at a loss for words?" Hahn said. Adim's brother had darker coloring, like his mother, and was tall for his fifteen years. "Uncle, you usually have as much to say as a gleeman who's been at the brandy for half the night!" Hahn liked to maintain a strong front for his brother, now that he was the man of the family. But sometimes it was good to be worried.

And Almen was worried. *Very* worried.

"We barely have a week's grain left," Adim said softly. "And what we've got, we got by promises on the crop. Nobody will give us anything, now. Nobody *has* anything."

The orchard was one of the largest producers in the region; half the men in the village worked it during one stage or another. They were depending on it. They *needed* it. With so much food going bad, with their stores used up during the unnatural winter . . .

And then there was the incident that had killed Graeger. The man had walked around a corner over in Negin Bridge and vanished. When people went looking, all they found was a twisted, leafless tree with a gray-white trunk that smelled of sulphur.

The Dragon's Fang had been scrawled on a few doors that night. People were more and more nervous. Once, Almen would have named them all fools, jumping at shadows and seeing bloody Trollocs under every cobblestone.

Now . . . well, now he wasn't so sure. He glanced eastward, toward Tar

Valon. Could the witches be to blame for the failed crop? He hated being so close to their nest, but Alysa needed the help.

They'd chopped down that tree and burned it. You could still smell brimstone in the square.

"Uncle?" Hahn said, sounding uncomfortable. "What . . . what do we do?"

"I . . ." What *did* they do? "Burn me, but we should all go to Caemlyn. I'm sure the new Queen has everything cleared up there by now. We can get me settled right by the law. Who ever heard of such a thing, gaining a price on your head for speaking out in favor of the Queen?" He realized he was rambling. The boys kept looking at him.

"No," Almen continued. "Burn me, boys, but that's wrong. We can't go. We need to keep on working. This isn't any worse than when I lost my entire millet field to a late frost twenty years back. We'll get through this, right as Light we will."

The trees themselves looked fine. Not an insect bite on them, leaves a little yellowed, but still good. Sure, the spring buds had come late, and the apples had grown slowly. But they *had* been growing.

"Hahn," Almen found himself saying. "You know your father's felling axe has those chips on it? Why don't you go about getting it sharpened? Adim, go fetch Uso and Moor and their carts. We'll sort through those fallen apples and see if any aren't rotted too badly. Maybe the pigs will take them." At least they still had two. But there'd been no piglets this spring.

The youths hesitated.

"Go on now," Almen said. "No use dallying because we've had a setback."

The lads hastened off, obedient. Idle hands made idle minds. Some work would keep them from thinking about what was to come.

There was no helping that for him. He leaned down on the fence, feeling the rough grooves of the unsanded planks under his arms. That wind tugged at the tails of his shirt again; Adrinne had always forced him to tuck it in, but now that she was gone, he . . . well, he never had liked wearing it that way.

He tucked the shirt in anyway.

The air smelled wrong somehow. Stale, like the air inside a city. Flies were starting to buzz around the shriveled bits that had once been apples.

Almen had lived a long time. He'd never kept count; Adrinne had done that for him. It wasn't important. He knew he'd seen a lot of years, and that was that.

He'd seen insects attack a crop; he'd seen plants lost to flood, to drought, or to negligence. But in all his years, he'd *never* seen anything like this. This was something evil. The village was already starving. They

didn't talk about it, not when the children or youths were around. The adults quietly gave what they had to the young and to women who were nursing. But the cows were going dry, the stores spoiling, the crops dying.

The letter in his pocket said his own farm had been set upon by passing mercenaries. They hadn't harmed anyone, but they'd taken every scrap of food. His sons survived only by digging half-grown potatoes from the crop and boiling them. They found nineteen out of every twenty rotting in the ground, inexplicably full of worms despite green growth above.

Dozens of nearby villages were suffering the same way. No food to be had. Tar Valon itself was having trouble feeding its people.

Staring down those neat, perfect rows of useless apple trees, Almen felt the crushing weight of it. Of trying to remain positive. Of seeing all his sister had worked for fail and rot. These apples . . . they were supposed to have saved the village, and his sons.

His stomach rumbled. It did that a lot lately.

This is it then, isn't it? he thought, eyes toward the too-yellow grass below. *The fight just ended.*

Almen slumped down, feeling a weight on his shoulders. *Adrinne*, he thought. There had been a time when he'd been quick to laugh, quick to talk. Now he felt worn, like a post that had been sanded and sanded and sanded until only a sliver was left. Maybe it was time to let go.

He felt something on his neck. Warmth.

He hesitated, then turned weary eyes toward the sky. Sunlight bathed his face. He gaped; it seemed so long since he'd seen pure sunlight. It shone down through a large break in the clouds, comforting, like the warmth of an oven baking a loaf of Adrinne's thick sourdough bread.

Almen stood, raising a hand to shade his eyes. He took a deep, long breath, and smelled . . . apple blossoms? He spun with a start.

The apple trees were flowering.

That was plain ridiculous. He rubbed his eyes, but that didn't dispel the image. They were blooming, all of them, white flowers breaking out between the leaves. The flies buzzed into the air and zipped away on the wind. The dark bits of apple on the ground *melted* away, like wax before a flame. In seconds, there was nothing left of them, not even juice. The ground had absorbed them.

What was happening? Apple trees didn't blossom twice. Was he going mad?

Footsteps sounded softly on the path that ran past the orchard. Almen spun to find a tall young man walking down out of the foothills. He had deep red hair and he wore ragged clothing: a brown cloak with loose

sleeves and a simple white linen shirt beneath. The trousers were finer, black with a delicate embroidery of gold at the cuff.

"Ho, stranger," Almen said, raising a hand, not knowing what else to say, not even sure if he'd seen what he thought he'd seen. "Did you . . . did you get lost up in the foothills?"

The man stopped, turning sharply. He seemed surprised to find Almen there. With a start, Almen realized the man's left arm ended in a stump.

The stranger looked about, then breathed in deeply. "No. I'm not lost. Finally. It feels like a great long time since I've understood the path before me."

Almen scratched the side of his face. Burn him, there was another patch he'd missed shaving. His hand had been shaking so much that he might as well have skipped the razor entirely. "Not lost? Son, that pathway only leads up the slopes of Dragonmount. The area's been hunted clean, if you were hoping to find some game. There's nothing back there of use."

"I wouldn't say that," the stranger said, glancing over his shoulder. "There are always things of use around, if you look closely enough. You can't stare at them too long. To learn but not be overwhelmed, that is the balance."

Almen folded his arms. The man's words . . . it seemed they were having two different conversations. Perhaps the lad wasn't right in the head. There was something about the man, though. The way he stood, the way those eyes of his stared with such calm intensity. Almen felt like standing up and dusting off his shirt to make himself more presentable.

"Do I know you?" Almen asked. Something about the young man was familiar.

"Yes," the lad said. Then he nodded toward the orchard. "Gather your people and collect those apples. They'll be needed in the days to come."

"The apples?" Almen said, turning. "But—" He froze. The trees were burgeoning with new, ripe red apples. The blossoms he'd seen earlier had fallen free, and blanketed the ground in white, like snow.

Those apples seemed to shine. Not just dozens of them on each tree, but hundreds. More than a tree should hold, each one perfectly ripe.

"I *am* going mad," Almen said, turning back to the man.

"It's not you who is mad, friend," the stranger said. "But the entire world. Gather those apples quickly. My presence will hold him off for a time, I think, and whatever you take now should be safe from his touch."

That voice . . . Those eyes, like gray gemstones cut and set in his face. "I *do* know you," Almen said, remembering an odd pair of youths he had given a lift in his cart years ago. "Light! You're him, aren't you? The one they're talking about?"

The man looked back at Almen. Meeting those eyes, Almen felt a strange sense of peace. "It is likely," the man said. "Men are often speaking of me." He smiled, then turned and continued on his way down the path.

"Wait," Almen said, raising a hand toward the man who could only be the Dragon Reborn. "Where are you going?"

The man looked back with a faint grimace. "To do something I've been putting off. I doubt she will be pleased by what I tell her."

Almen lowered his hand, watching as the stranger strode away, down a pathway between two fenced orchards, trees laden with blood-red apples. Almen thought—for a moment—he could see something around the man. A lightness to the air, warped and bent.

Almen watched the man until he vanished, then dashed toward Alys's house. The old pain in his hip was gone, and he felt as if he could run a dozen leagues. Halfway to the house, he met Adim and the two workers coming to the orchard. They regarded him with concerned eyes as he pulled to a halt.

Unable to speak, Almen turned and pointed back at the orchards. The apples were red specks, dotting the green like freckles.

"What's that?" Uso asked, rubbing his long face. Moor squinted, then began running toward the orchard.

"Gather everyone," Almen said, winded. "*Everyone* from the village, from the villages nearby, people passing on Shyman's road. Everyone. Get them here to gather and pick."

"Pick what?" Adim asked with a frown.

"Apples," Almen said. "What else bloody grows on apple trees! Listen, we need every one of those apples picked before the day ends. You hear me? Go! Spread the word! There's a harvest after all!"

They ran off to look, of course. It was hard to blame them for that. Almen continued on, and as he did, he noticed for the first time that the grass around him seemed greener, healthier.

He looked eastward. Almen felt a *pull* inside of him. Something was tugging him softly in the direction the stranger had gone.

Apples first, he thought. Then . . . well, then he'd see.



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