

ТЕМНАЯ БАШНЯ IV: КОЛДУН И КРИСТАЛ

THE DARK TOWER IV: WIZARD & GLASS

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ОТРЫВОК ИЗ КНИГИ. 1 И 2 ГЛАВЫ.

Chapter 1

BENEATH THE DEMON MOON

The town of Candleton was a poisoned and irradiated ruin, but not dead; after all the decades and centuries, it still twitched, still pulsed with its own tenebrous life--trundling beetles the size of turtles, birds that looked like small, misshapen dragonlets, a few stumbling robots that passed in and out of the rotten buildings like stainless-steel zombies, their joints squalling, their nuclear eyes flickering.

"Show your pass, pard!" cried the one that had been stuck in a corner of the lobby of the Candleton Travellers' Hotel for the last two hundred and thirty-four years. Embossed on the rusty lozenge of its head was a six-pointed star. It had over the years managed to dig a shallow concavity in the steel-sheathed wall blocking its way, but that was all.

"Show your pass, pard! Elevated radiation levels possible south and east of town! Show your pass, pard! Elevated radiation levels possible south and east of town!"

A bloated rat-thing, blind and dragging most of its guts behind it in a sac like a rotten placenta, struggled over the posse robot's feet. The posse robot took no notice, just went on butting its steel head into the steel wall. "Show your pass, pard! Elevated radiation levels possible, dad rattit and gods cuss it! Caution advised!" Behind it, in the hotel bar, the skulls of men and women who had come in here for one last drink before the cataclysm caught up with them grinned as if they had died laughing. Perhaps some of them had.

When Blaine the Mono blammed overhead, running up the night like a bullet running up the barrel of a gun, windows broke, dust sifted down, and several of the skulls disintegrated like ancient pottery vases. Outside, a brief hurricane of radioactive dust blew up the street, and the hitching-post in front of the Elegant Beef and Pork Restaurant was sucked into the squally updraft like smoke. In the town square, the Candleton Fountain split in two, spilling out not water but only dust, snakes, mutie scorpions, and a few of the blindly trundling turtle-beetles.

Then the shape which had hurtled above the town was gone as if it had never been, Candleton reverted to the mouldering activity which had been its substitute for life over the last two and a half centuries . . . and then the trailing sonic boom caught up, slamming its thunderclap above the town for the first time in seven years, causing enough vibration to tumble the mercantile store on the far side of the fountain . . . and to at long last kill the posse robot. It tried to voice one final warning: "Elevated rad--" and then quit for good, facing into its corner like a child that has been bad.

Two or three hundred wheels outside of Candleton, as one travelled along the path of the beam, the radiation levels and concentrations of DEP3 in the soil began to fall off rapidly. Here the mono's track swooped back down until it was less than ten feet off the ground, and here a doe that looked almost normal walked prettily from piney woods to drink from a stream in which the water had three-quarters cleansed itself.

The doe was not normal--a stumpish fifth leg dangled down from the center of her lower belly like a teat, wagging bonelessly to and fro when she walked, and a third eye--not just blind but vestigial--peered milkily from the left side of her muzzle. Yet she was fertile, and her DNA was in reasonably good order for a twelfth-generation mutie. In her six years of life, she had given birth to three live young. Two of these fawns had been not just viable but normal--threaded stock, Aunt Talitha of River Crossing would have called them. The third, a skinless, bawling horror, had been killed quickly by its sire.

The world--this part of it, at any rate--had begun to heal itself.

The deer slipped her mouth into the water, began to drink . . . and then looked up, eyes wide, muzzle dripping. Off in the distance she could hear a low humming sound. A moment later this was joined by an eyelash of light. Alarm flared in the doe's nerves, but although her reflexes were fast and the light when first glimpsed was still many wheels away across the desolate countryside, there was never a chance for her to escape what was coming. Before she could even begin to fire her muscles, the distant spark had swelled to a searing dragon's eye of light that flooded the stream and the clearing with its glare. With the light came the maddening hum of Blaine's slo-trans engines,

running at full capacity. There was a blur of pink above the concrete ridge which bore the rail; a rooster-tail of dust, stones, small dismembered animals, and whirling foliage followed along after. The doe was killed instantly by the concussion of Blaine's passage. Too large to be sucked along in the mono's wake, she was still yanked forward almost seventy yards, with water dripping from her muzzle and hoofs. Much of her hide (and the vestigial fifth leg) was torn from her body and pulled after Blaine like a discarded garment.

There was a brief silence, thin as new skin or early ice on a Year's End pond, and then the trailing sonic boom came rushing after like some noisy creature late for a wedding-feast, tearing the silence apart, knocking a single mutated bird--it might have been a raven-- dead out of the air. The bird fell like a stone and splashed into the stream.

In the distance, a dwindling red eye: Blaine's taillight.

Overhead, a full moon came out from behind a scrim of cloud, painting the clearing and the stream in the tawdry hues of the jewelry one sees in pawnshop windows. It pooled in the three eyes of the dead doe. There was a face in the moon, but not one upon which lovers would wish to look. It seemed the scant face of a skull, like those in the Candleton Travellers' Hotel; a face which looked upon those few things still alive and struggling below with the amusement of a lunatic. In Gilead, before the world had moved on, the full moon of Year's End had been called the Demon Moon, and it was considered extremely ill luck to look directly at it.

Now, however, it was hard not to look. Now there were demons everywhere.

Susannah looked at the route-map and saw that the green dot marking their present position was now almost halfway between Candleton and Rilea, Blaine's next stop. Except who's stopping? she thought.

From the route-map she turned to Eddie. His gaze was still directed up at the ceiling of the Barony Coach. She followed it and saw a square which could only be a trapdoor (except when you were dealing with futuristic shit like a talking train, she supposed, you called it a hatch, or a pod, or something even cooler). Stencilled on it was a simple red drawing which showed a man stepping through the square opening. Susannah tried to imagine following the implied instruction and popping up through that hatch at over eight hundred miles an hour. She got a quick but clear image of a woman's head being ripped from her neck like a flower from its stalk; she saw the head flying backward along the length of the Barony Coach, perhaps bouncing once, and then disappearing into the dark, eyes staring and hair rippling.

She pushed the picture away as fast as she could. The hatch up there was almost certainly locked shut, anyway. Blaine the Mono had no intention of letting them go. They might win their way out, but Susannah didn't think that was a sure thing even if they managed to stump Blaine with a riddle.

Sorry to say this, but you sound like just one more honky motherfucker to me, honey, she thought in a mental voice that was not quite Detta Walker's. I don't trust your mechanical ass any further than I could toss a basket of apples. You apt to be more dangerous beaten than with the blue ribbon pinned to your memory banks.

Jake was holding his tattered book of riddles out to the gunslinger as if he no longer wanted the responsibility of carrying it. Susannah knew how the kid must feel; their lives might very well be in those grimy, well-thumbed pages. She wasn't sure she would want the responsibility of holding onto it, either.

"Roland!" Jake whispered. "Do you want this?"

"Ont!" Oy said, giving the gunslinger a forbidding glance. "Olan-ont-iss!" The bumbler fixed his teeth on the book, took it from Jake's hand, and stretched his disproportionately long neck toward Roland, offering him Riddle-De-Dum! Brain-Twisters and Puzzles for Everyone!

Roland glanced at it for a moment, his expression distant and preoccupied, then shook his head. "Not yet." He looked forward at the route-map. Blaine had no face, so the map had to serve them as a fixing-point. The flashing green dot was closer to Rilea now. Susannah wondered briefly what the countryside through which they were passing looked like, and decided she didn't really want to know. Not after what they'd seen as they left the city of Lud.

"Blaine!" Roland called.

"YES."

"Can you leave the room? We need to confer."

You crazy if you think he's gonna do that, sugar, Susannah thought, but Blaine's response was quick and eager.

"YES, GUNSLINGER. I CAN AND WILL TURN OFF ALL MY SENSORS IN THE BARONY COACH. WHEN YOUR CONFERENCE IS DONE AND YOU ARE READY TO BEGIN THE RIDDLING, I WILL RETURN."

"Yeah, you and fuckin' General MacArthur," Eddie muttered.

"WHAT DID YOU SAY, EDDIE OF NEW YORK?"

"Nothing," Eddie said. "Talking to myself, that's all."

"TO SUMMON ME, SIMPLY TOUCH THE ROUTE-MAP," said Blaine. "AS LONG AS THE MAP IS RED, MY SENSORS ARE OFF. SEE YOU LATER, ALLIGATOR. AFTER AWHILE, CROCODILE. DON'T FORGET TO WRITE." A pause. Then: "OLIVE OIL BUT NOT CASTORIA."

The route-map rectangle at the front of the cabin suddenly turned a red so bright Susannah couldn't look at it without squinting.

"Olive oil but not castoria?" Jake asked. "What the heck does that mean?"

"It doesn't matter," Roland said. "We don't have much time. The mono travels just as fast toward its point of ending whether Blaine's with us or not."

"You don't really believe he's gone, do you?" Eddie asked. "A slippery puppy like him? Come on, Roland, get real. He's peeking under the blindfold. I guarantee you that."

"I doubt it very much," Roland said, and Susannah decided she agreed with him . . . for now, at least. "You could hear how excited he was at the idea of riddling again after all these years. And--"

"And he's confident," Susannah said. "Doesn't expect to have much trouble with the likes of us."

"Will he?" Jake asked the gunslinger. "Will he have trouble with us?"

"I don't know," Roland said. "I don't have a Watch Me hidden up my sleeve, if that's what you're asking. It's a straight game . . . but at least it's a game I've played before. We've all played it before, at least to some extent. And there's that." He nodded toward the book which Jake had taken back from Oy. "There are forces at work here, big ones, and not all of them are working to keep us away from the Tower."

Susannah heard him, but it was Blaine she was thinking of--Blaine who had gone away and left them alone, like the little boy who has been chosen "it" obediently covering his eyes while his playmates hide. And wasn't that what they were? Blaine's playmates? The thought was somehow worse than the image she'd had of trying the escape hatch and having her head torn off.

"So what do we do?" Eddie asked. "You must have an idea, or you never would have sent him away."

"His great intelligence--coupled with his long period of loneliness and forced inactivity--may have combined to make him more human than he knows or understands. That's my hope, anyway. So first, we must establish a kind of geography. We must tell, if we can, where he is weak and where he is strong, where he is sure of the game and where not so sure. Riddles are not just about the cleverness of the riddler, never think it. They are also about the blind spots of he who is riddled."

"Will he have blind spots?" Eddie asked.

"If he doesn't," Roland said calmly, "we are going to die on this train."

"I like the way you have of softening the blow," Eddie said with a thin smile. "Kind of easing us over the rough spots. It's one of your many charms."

"We will riddle him four times to begin with," Roland said. "Easy, not so easy, quite hard, very hard. He'll answer all four, of that I am confident, but we will be listening for how he answers."

Eddie was nodding slowly, and Susannah felt a small, almost reluctant glimmer of hope. It sounded like the right approach, all right.

"Then we'll send him away again and hold palaver," the gunslinger said. "Mayhap we'll get an idea of what direction to send our horses. These first riddles can come from anywhere, but"-- he nodded gravely toward the book--"based on Jake's story of the bookstore, the answer we really need should be in there, not in any memories I have of Fair-Day riddlings. Must be in there."

"Question," Susannah said.

Roland looked at her, eyebrows raised over his faded, dangerous eyes.

"It's a question we're looking for, not an answer," she said. "This time it's the answers that are apt to get us killed."

The gunslinger nodded. He looked puzzled--frustrated, even--and this was not an expression Susannah liked seeing on his face. But this time, when Jake held out the book, Roland took it. He held it for a moment (its faded but still gay red cover looked very strange in his big sunburned hands . . . especially in the right one, with its essential reduction of two fingers), then passed it on to Eddie.

"You're easy," Roland said, turning to Susannah.

"Perhaps," she replied, with a trace of a smile, "but it's still not a very polite thing to say to a lady, Roland."

He turned to Jake. "You'll go second, with one that's a little harder. I'll go third." He turned to Eddie. "You'll go last, Eddie. Pick one from the book that looks hard . . ."

"The hard ones are toward the back," Jake supplied.

". . . but none of your foolishness, mind. This is life and death. The time for foolishness is past."

Eddie looked at him--old long, tall, and ugly, who'd done God knew how many ugly things in the name of reaching his Dark Tower--and wondered if Roland had any idea at all of how much that

hurt. Just that casual admonition not to behave like a child, grinning and cracking jokes, now that their lives were at stake. No, he supposed Roland didn't. He opened his mouth to say something--an Eddie Dean Special, if you could dig that, something that would be both funny and stinging at the same time, the kind of remark that always used to drive his brother Henry bugshit-- and then closed it again. You could talk to Roland, and sometimes he even heard what you were saying, but maybe this wasn't the right time to get into a rap about how Roland was hurting Eddie.

Dean's poor wittle self-image. Maybe long, tall, and ugly was even right; maybe, now that their lives depended on asking the right question, it was time to put away the zingers, the one-liners, and the dead-baby jokes.

Maybe it was finally time to grow up.

After three more minutes of murmured consultation and some quick flipping through Riddle-De-Dum! on Eddie's and Susannah's parts (Jake already knew the one he wanted to try Blaine with first, he'd said), Roland rose, went to the front of the Barony Coach, and laid his hand on the fiercely glowing rectangle there. The route-map reappeared at once. Although there was no sensation of movement now that the coach was closed, the green dot was closer to Rilea than ever.

"SO, ROLAND SON OF STEVEN!" Blaine said. To Eddie he sounded more than jovial; he sounded next door to hilarious. "IS YOUR KA-TET READY TO BEGIN?"

"Yes," Roland said. "Susannah of New York will begin the first round." He turned to her, lowered his voice a little (not that she reckoned that would do much good if Blaine wanted to listen), and said: "You won't have to step forward like the rest of us, because of your legs, but you must speak fair and address him by name each time you talk to him. If--when--he answers your riddle correctly, say `Thankee-sai, Blaine, you have answered true.' Then Jake will step forward into the aisle and have his turn. All right?"

"And if he should get it wrong, or not guess at all?"

Ronald smiled grimly. "I think that's one thing we don't have to worry about just yet." He raised his voice again. "Blaine?"

"YES, GUNSLINGER."

Roland took a deep breath. "It starts now."

"EXCELLENT!"

Roland nodded at Susannah. Eddie squeezed one of her hands; Jake patted the other. Oy gazed at her raptly with his gold-ringed eyes.

Susannah smiled at them nervously, then looked up at the route-map. "Hello, Blaine."

"HOWDY, SUSANNAH OF NEW YORK."

Her heart was pounding, her armpits were damp, and here was something she had first discovered way back in the first grade: it was hard to begin. It was hard to stand up in front of the class and be first with your song, your joke, your report on how you spent your summer vacation . . . or your riddle, for that matter. The one she had decided upon was one from Jake Chambers's crazed English essay, which he had recited to them almost verbatim during their long palaver after leaving the old people of River Crossing. The essay, titled My Understanding of Truth, had contained two riddles, one of which Eddie had already used on Blaine. Blaine had answered, then told them they would have to do better if they really expected him to take them anywhere. Well, they had expected it and Blaine had done it and if the whole crazy shooting-match proved anything, Susannah supposed, it proved the old saying about how you should be careful what you wished for, 'cause you just might get it.

"SUSANNAH? ARE YOU THERE, LI'L COWGIRL?"

Teasing again, but this time the teasing sounded light, good-natured. Good-humored. Blaine could be charming when he got what he wanted. Like certain spoiled children she had known.

"Yes, Blaine, I am, and here is my riddle. What has four wheels and flies?"

There was a peculiar click, as if Blaine were mimicking the sound of a man popping his tongue against the roof of his mouth. It was followed by a brief pause. When Blaine replied, most of the jocularly had gone out of his voice. "THE TOWN GARBAGE WAGON, OF COURSE. A CHILD'S RIDDLE. IF THE REST OF YOUR RIDDLES ARE NO BETTER, I WILL BE EXTREMELY SORRY I SAVED YOUR LIVES FOR EVEN A SHORT WHILE."

The route-map flashed, not red this time but pale pink. "Don't make him angry," the voice of Little Blaine begged. Each time it spoke, Susannah found herself imagining a sweaty little bald man whose every movement was a kind of cringe. The voice of Big Blaine came from everywhere (like the voice of God in a Cecil B. DeMille movie, Susannah thought), but Little Blaine's came drifting down from the speaker directly over their heads. "Please don't make him angry, fellows; he's already got the mono in the red, speedwise, and the track compensators can barely keep up. This route's trackage has degenerated terribly since the last time we came out this way."

Susannah, who had been on her share of bumpy trolleys and subways in her time, felt nothing--

the ride was as smooth now as it had been when they had first pulled out of the Cradle of Lud--but she believed Little Blaine anyway. She guessed that if they did feel a bump, it would be the last thing any of them would ever feel.

Roland poked an elbow into her side, bringing her back to her current situation.

"Thankee-sai, Blaine, you have answered true," she said, and then, as an afterthought, tapped her throat rapidly three times with the fingers of her right hand. It was what Roland had done when speaking to Aunt Talitha for the first time.

"THANK YOU FOR YOUR COURTESY," Blaine said. He sounded amused again, and Susannah reckoned that was good even if his amusement was at her expense. "I AM NOT FEMALE, HOWEVER. INsofar AS I HAVE A SEX, IT IS MALE."

Susannah looked at Roland, bewildered.

"Left hand for men," he said. "On the breastbone." He tapped to demonstrate.

"Oh."

Roland turned to Jake. The boy stood, put Oy on his chair (which did no good; Oy immediately jumped down and followed after Jake when he stepped into the aisle to face the route-map), and turned his attention to Blaine.

"Hello, Blaine, this is Jake. You know, son of Elmer."

"SPEAK YOUR RIDDLE."

"What can run but never walks, has a mouth but never talks, has a bed but never sleeps, has a head but never weeps?"

"NOT BAD! NOT BAD AT ALL! ONE HOPES SUSANNAH OF NEW YORK WILL LEARN FROM YOUR EXAMPLE, JAKE SON OF ELMER. THE ANSWER MUST BE SELF-EVIDENT TO ANYONE OF ANY INTELLIGENCE AT ALL, BUT A DECENT EFFORT, NEVERTHELESS. A RIVER."

"Thankee-sai, Blaine, you have answered true." He tapped the bunched fingers of his left hand three times against his breastbone and then sat down. Susannah put her arm around him and gave him a brief squeeze.

Jake looked at her gratefully.

Now Roland stood up. "Hile, Blaine," he said.

"HILE, GUNSLINGER." Once again Blaine sounded amused . . . possibly by the greeting, which Susannah hadn't heard before. Heil what? she wondered. Heil Hitler was the only thing that came to mind, and that made her think of the downed plane they'd found outside Lud. A Focke-Wulf, Jake had claimed. She didn't know about that, but she knew it had contained one seriously dead harrier, too old even to stink. "SPEAK YOUR RIDDLE, ROLAND, AND LET IT BE HANDSOME."

"Handsome is as handsome does, Blaine. So said my mother. In any case, here it is: What has four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon, and three legs at night?"

"THAT IS INDEED HANDSOME," Blaine allowed. "SIMPLE BUT HANDSOME, JUST THE SAME. THE ANSWER IS A HUMAN BEING, WHO CRAWLS ON HANDS AND KNEES IN BABYHOOD, WALKS ON HIS OR HER OWN TWO LEGS DURING ADULTHOOD, AND WHO GOES ABOUT WITH THE HELP OF A CANE IN OLD AGE."

Blaine sounded positively smug, and Susannah suddenly discovered a mildly interesting fact: she loathed the self-satisfied, murderous thing. Machine or not, it or he, it didn't matter, she loathed Blaine. She had an idea she would have felt much the same even if he had not made them wager their lives in a stupid riddling contest.

Roland, however, did not look the slightest put out of countenance. "Thankee-sai, Blaine, you have answered true." He sat down without tapping his breastbone and looked at Eddie. Eddie stood up and stepped into the aisle.

"What's happening, Blaine my man?" he asked. Roland winced and shook his head, putting his mutilated right hand up briefly to shade his eyes.

Silence from Blaine.

"Blaine? Are you there?"

"YES, BUT IN NO MOOD FOR STUPIDITY, EDDIE OF NEW YORK. SPEAK YOUR RIDDLE. I SUSPECT IT WILL BE DIFFICULT IN SPITE OF YOUR FOOLISH POSES. I LOOK FORWARD TO IT."

Eddie glanced at Roland, who waved a hand at him--Go on, for your father's sake, go on!--and then looked back at the route-map, where the green dot had just passed the point marked Rilea. Susannah saw that Eddie suspected what she herself all but knew: Blaine understood what they were up to, understood they were trying to test his capabilities with a spectrum of riddles. Blaine knew it . . . and welcomed it.

Susannah felt her heart sink as any hopes they might find a quick and easy way out of this disappeared.

"Well," Eddie said, "I don't know how hard it'll seem to you, but it struck me as a toughie." Nor did he know the answer, since that section of Riddle-De-Dum! had been torn out, but he didn't think

that made any difference; their knowing the answers hadn't been part of the ground-rules.

"I SHALL HEAR AND ANSWER."

"No sooner spoken than broken," Eddie said. "What is it?"

"SILENCE, A THING YOU KNOW LITTLE ABOUT, EDDIE OF NEW YORK," Blaine said with no pause at all, and Eddie Dean felt his heart drop a little. As was the case with most good answers, he supposed, there was no need to consult with the others; the answer was self-evident. And having it come back at him so quickly was the real bummer. Eddie never would have said so, but he had harbored the hope--almost a secret surety--of bringing Blaine down with a single riddle, ker-smash, all the King's horses and all the King's men couldn't put Blaine together again. The same secret surety, he supposed, that he had harbored every time he picked up a pair of dice in some sharpie's back-bedroom crap game, every time he called for a hit on seventeen while playing blackjack. That feeling that you couldn't go wrong because you were you, the best, the one and only, and you had this game firmly by the place where the short and curlies grew.

"Yeah," he said, sighing. "Silence, a thing I know little about. Thankee-sai, Blaine, you speak truth."

"IF SUCH IS THE BEST QUALITY YOUR BOOK CAN OFFER, YOU HAVE NO HOPE OF AVOIDING THE PLACE WHERE THE PATH ENDS IN THE CLEARING. BUT THAT MAY NOT BE THE CASE. I SUSPECT YOU HAVE ONLY BEEN EXPLORING. IS IT NOT SO?"

None of them answered. Eddie felt a childish (but strong) desire to blow a raspberry at the route-map, and controlled it.

"I HOPE YOU HAVE DISCOVERED SOMETHING WHICH WILL HELP YOU," Blaine said, and Eddie thought: You liar. You fucking mechanical liar. The complacent tone had returned to Blaine's voice, and Eddie found it of some passing interest that a machine could express such a range of emotion. Had the Great Old Ones built it in, or had Blaine created an emotional rainbow for himself at some point? A little dipolar pretty with which to pass the long decades and centuries? "DO YOU WISH ME TO GO AWAY AGAIN SO YOU CAN CONSULT?"

"Yes," Roland said.

The route-map flashed bright red. Eddie turned toward the gunslinger. Roland composed his face quickly, but before he did, Eddie saw a horrible thing there: a brief look of complete hopelessness. What made it especially horrible was that Eddie had never seen such a look there before, not when Roland had been dying of the lobstrosities' bites, not when Eddie had been pointing the gunslinger's own revolver at him, not even when the hideous Gasher had taken Jake prisoner and disappeared into Lud with him.

"What do we do next?" Jake asked. "Do another round of the four of us?"

"I think that would serve little purpose," Roland said slowly. "Blaine must know thousands of riddles--perhaps millions--and that is bad. Worse, far worse, he understands the how of riddling . . . the place the mind has to go in order to make them and solve them." He turned to Eddie and Susannah, sitting once more with their arms about each other. "Am I right about that?" he asked them. "Do you agree?"

"Yes," Susannah said, and Eddie nodded reluctantly. He didn't want to agree . . . but he did. He didn't think Jake had seen that momentary look of hopelessness on Roland's face, which was good, but he had an idea from the way Suze was looking at the man that she had, and that was bad.

"So?" Jake asked. "What do we do, Roland? I mean, there has to be a way out of this . . . doesn't there?"

Lie to him, you bastard, Eddie sent fiercely in Roland's direction. For once in your life forget whatever fucked-up Boy Scout troop it was you came from and lie to him.

Roland, perhaps hearing the thought, did the best he could. He touched Jake's hair with his diminished hand and riffled through it. "There's always an answer, Jake . . . just as there's always a question that can't be answered. The real question is whether or not we'll have time to find the right question. He said it took him a little under nine hours to run his route . . ."

"Eight hours and forty-five minutes," Jake put in.

". . . and that's not much time. We've already been running almost an hour--" "And if that map's right, we're almost halfway to Topeka," Susannah said in a tight voice. "Could be our mechanical pal's been lying to us about the length of the run. Hedging his bets a little."

"Could be," Roland agreed.

"So what do we do?" Jake repeated.

Roland drew in a deep breath, held it, let it out. "Let me riddle him alone, for now. I'll ask him the hardest ones I remember from the Fair-Days of my youth. Then, Jake, if we're approaching the point of . . . if we're approaching Topeka at this same speed with Blaine still unposed, I think you should ask him the last few riddles in your book. The hardest riddles." He rubbed the side of his face distractedly and looked at the ice sculpture, which had now melted to an unrecognizable hulk. "I still

think the answer must be in there. Why else would you have been drawn to it before coming back to this world?"

"And us?" Susannah asked. "What do Eddie and I do?"

"Think," Roland said. "Think, for your fathers' sakes."

" 'I do not shoot with my hand,' " Eddie said. He suddenly felt far away, strange to himself. It was the way he'd felt when he had seen first the slingshot and then the key in pieces of wood, just waiting for him to whittle them free . . . and at the same time, this feeling was not like that at all.

Roland was looking at him oddly. "Yes, Eddie, you say true. A gunslinger shoots with his mind. What have you thought of?"

"Nothing." He might have said more, but all at once a strange image--a strange memory--intervened: Roland sitting by Jake at one of their stopping-points on the way to Lud. Both of them sitting in front of an unlit campfire. Roland once more at his everlasting lessons. Jake's turn, this time. Jake with the flint and steel, trying to quicken the fire. Spark after spark licking out and dying in the dark. And Roland had said that he was being silly. That he was just being . . . well . . . silly.

"No," Eddie said. "He didn't say that at all. At least not to the kid, he didn't."

"Eddie?" Susannah. Sounding concerned. Almost frightened.

Well why don't you ask him what he said, bro? That was Henry's voice, the voice of The Great Sage and Eminent Junkie. First time in a long time. Ask him, he's practically sitting right next to you, go on and ask him what he said. And who he said it to. Quit dancing around like a baby with a load in his diapers.

Except that was a bad idea, because that wasn't the way things worked in Roland's world. In Roland's world everything was riddles, in Roland's world you didn't shoot with your hand but with your mind, your motherfucking mind, and what did you say to someone who wasn't getting the spark into the kindling? Move your flint in closer, of course, and that's what Roland had said: Move your flint in closer, and hold it steady.

Except none of that was what this was about, not really. It was close, yes, sure it was, but close only counts in horseshoes, as Henry Dean had been wont to say before he became The Great Sage and Eminent Junkie.

Eddie's memory was jinking a little because Roland had embarrassed him . . . shamed him . . . made light of him . . .

Probably not on purpose, but . . . something. Something that had made him feel the way Henry always used to make him feel, of course it was, why else would Henry be here, after such a long absence?

All of them looking at him now. Even Oy.

"Go on," he told Roland, sounding a little waspish. "You wanted us to think, we're thinking, already." He himself was thinking so hard

(I shoot with my mind)

that his goddam brains were almost on fire, but he wasn't going to tell old long, tall, and ugly that. "Go on and ask Blaine some riddles. Do your part."

Roland nodded slowly. "As you will, Eddie." He rose from his seat, went forward, and laid his hand on the scarlet rectangle again. The route-map reappeared at once. The green dot had moved farther beyond Rilea, but it was clear to Eddie that the mono had slowed down significantly, either obeying some built-in program or because Blaine had decided he was having too much fun to hurry.

"IS YOUR KA-TET READY TO CONTINUE OUR FAIR-DAY RIDDLING, ROLAND SON OF STEVEN?"

"Yes, Blaine," Roland said, and to Eddie his voice sounded heavy. "I will riddle you alone for awhile, now. If you have no objection."

"AS DINH AND FATHER OF YOUR KA-TET, SUCH IS YOUR RIGHT, ROLAND SON OF STEVEN. WILL THESE BE FAIR-DAY RIDDLES?"

"Yes."

"GOOD." Loathsome satisfaction in that voice. "I WOULD HEAR MORE OF THOSE."

"All right." Roland took a deep breath, then began. "Feed me and I live. Give me to drink and I die. What am I?"

"FIRE." No hesitation. Only that insufferable smugness, a tone which said That was old to me when your grandmother's grandmother was young, but try again! This is more fun than I've had in centuries, so try again!

"I pass before the sun, Blaine, yet make no shadow. What am I?"

"WIND." No hesitation.

"You speak true, sai. Next. This is as light as a feather, yet no man can hold it for long."

"ONE'S BREATH." No hesitation.

Yet he did hesitate, Eddie thought suddenly. Jake and Susannah were watching Roland with agonized concentration, fists clenched, willing him to ask Blaine the right riddle, the stumper, the

one with the Get-the-Fuck-Out-of-Jail-Free card hidden inside it; Eddie couldn't look at them--Suze, in particular--and keep his concentration. He lowered his gaze to his own hands, which were also clenched, and forced them to open on his lap. It was surprisingly hard to do. From the aisle, he heard Roland continuing to trot out the golden oldies of his youth.

"Riddle me this, Blaine: If you break me, I'll not stop working. If you can touch me, my work is done. If you lose me, you must find me with a ring soon after. What am I?"

Susannah's breath caught for a moment, and although he was looking down, Eddie knew she was thinking what he was thinking: that was a good one, a damned good one, maybe-- "THE HUMAN HEART," Blaine said. Still with not a whit of hesitation.

"THIS RIDDLE IS BASED IN LARGE PART UPON HUMAN POETIC CONCEITS; SEE FOR INSTANCE JOHN AVERY, SIRONIA HUNTZ, ONDOLA, WILLIAM BLAKE, ALLEN TATE, VERONICA MAYS, AND OTHERS. IT IS REMARKABLE HOW HUMAN BEINGS WASTE THEIR TIME AND THEIR MINDS ON LOVE. YET IT IS CONSTANT FROM ONE LEVEL OF THE TOWER TO THE NEXT, EVEN IN THESE DEGENERATE DAYS. CONTINUE, ROLAND OF GILEAD."

Susannah's breath resumed. Eddie's hands wanted to roll into fists again, but he wouldn't let them. Move your flint in closer, Eddie thought in Roland's voice. Move your flint in closer, for your father's sake!

And Blaine the Mono ran on, ran southeast under the Demon Moon.

Chapter 2

THE FALLS OF THE HOUNDS

Jake didn't know how easy or difficult Blaine would find the last ten puzzlers in Riddle-De-Dum!, but they looked pretty tough to him. Of course, he reminded himself, he wasn't a thinking-machine with a city-wide bank of computers to draw on. All he could do was go for it; God hates a coward, as Eddie sometimes said. If the last ten failed, he would try Aaron Deepneau's Samson riddle (Out of the eater came forth meat, and so on). And if that one also failed, he'd probably . . . well . . . shit, he didn't know what he'd do, or even how he'd feel. The truth is, Jake thought, I'm fried.

And why not? He had gone through an extraordinary swarm of emotions in the last eight hours or so. First, terror: of being sure he and Oy were going to drop off the suspension bridge and to their deaths in the River Send; of being driven by Gasher through the crazed maze that was Lud; of having to look into The Tick-Tock Man's terrible green eyes and try to answer his unanswerable questions about time, Nazis, and the nature of transitive circuits. Being questioned by Tick-Tock had been like having to take a Final Exam in hell.

Then the exhilaration of being rescued by Roland (and Oy; without Oy, he would almost certainly be toast now), the wonder of all they had seen beneath the city, his awe at the way Susannah had solved Blaine's gate-riddle, and the final mad rush to get aboard the mono before Blaine could release the stocks of nerve-gas stored under Lud.

After surviving all that, a kind of blissed-out surety had settled over him--of course Roland would stump Blaine, who would then keep his part of the bargain and set them down safe and sound at his final stop (Topeka, or whatever passed for Topeka in this world). Then they would go on, they would find the Dark Tower, and they would do whatever they were supposed to do there, right what needed righting, fix what needed fixing. And then? They Lived Happily Ever After, of course. Like folk in a fairy tale.

Except . . .

They shared one another's thoughts, Roland had said; sharing khef was part of what ka-tet meant. And what had been seeping into Jake's thoughts ever since Roland had stepped into the aisle and begun to try Blaine with riddles from his young days, was a sense of doom. It wasn't coming just from Roland; Susannah was sending out the same grim blue-black vibe. Only Eddie wasn't sending it, and that was because Eddie had gone off somewhere, was chasing his own thoughts. That might be good, but there were no guarantees, and----and Jake began to be scared again. Worse, he began to feel desperate, like a creature that is pressed deeper and deeper into its final corner by a relentless foe. His fingers worked restlessly in Oy's fur, and when he looked down at them, he realized an amazing thing: the hand which Oy had bitten into to keep from falling off the bridge no longer hurt. He could see the holes the bumbler's teeth had made, and blood was still crusted heavily in his palm and on his wrist, but the hand itself no longer hurt. He flexed it cautiously. There was some pain, but it was low and distant, hardly there at all.

"Blaine, what may go up a chimney down but cannot go down a chimney up?"

"A LADY'S PARASOL," Blaine replied with his infuriating lack of hesitation . . . and in that tone of jolly complacency which Jake, too, was coming to loathe.

"Thankee-sai, Blaine, once again you have answered true. Next--"

"Roland?"

The gunslinger looked around at Jake, and his look of concentration lightened a bit. It wasn't a smile, but it went a little way in that direction, at least, and Jake was glad. "What is it, Jake?"

"My hand. It was hurting like crazy, and now it's stopped!"

"SHUCKS, JAKE," Blaine said in the drawling voice of John Wayne. "I COULDN'T WATCH A HOUND DOG SUFFER WITH A MASHED-UP FOREPAW LIKE THAT, LET ALONE A FINE LITTLE TRAILHAND LIKE YOURSELF. SO I FIXED IT UP."

"How?" Jake asked.

"LOOK ON THE ARM OF YOUR SEAT."

Jake did, and saw a faint gridwork of lines. It looked a little like the speaker of the transistor radio he'd had when he was seven or eight.

"ANOTHER BENEFIT OF TRAVELLING BARONY COACH," Blaine went on in his smug voice. It crossed Jake's mind that Blaine would fit in perfectly at the Piper School. The world's first slo-trans, dipolar nerd. "THE HAND-SCAN SPECTRUM MAGNIFIER IS A COMPLETE DIAGNOSTIC TOOL WHICH IS CAPABLE OF ADMINISTERING MINOR FIRST AID, SUCH AS I HAVE PERFORMED ON YOU. IT IS ALSO A NUTRIENT-DELIVERY SYSTEM, A BRAIN-PATTERN RECORDING DEVICE, A STRESS-ANALYZER, AND AN EMOTION- ENHANCER WHICH CAN NATURALLY STIMULATE THE PRODUCTION OF ENDORPHINS. HAND-SCAN IS ALSO CAPABLE OF CREATING VERY BELIEVABLE ILLUSIONS AND HALLUCINATIONS. WOULD YOU CARE TO HAVE YOUR FIRST SEXUAL EXPERIENCE WITH A NOTED SEX-GODDESS FROM YOUR LEVEL OF THE TOWER, JAKE OF NEW YORK? PERHAPS MARILYN MONROE, RAQUEL WELCH, OR EDITH BUNKER?"

Jake laughed. He guessed that laughing at Blaine might be risky, but this time he just couldn't help it. "There is no Edith Bunker," he said. "She's just a character on a TV show. The actress's name is, um, Jean Stapleton. Also, she looks like Mrs. Shaw. She's our housekeeper. Nice, but not--you know --a babe."

Silence from Blaine for a long, long time. When the voice of the computer returned, a certain coldness had replaced the jocose ain't-we-having-fun tone of voice.

"I CRY YOUR PARDON, JAKE OF NEW YORK. I ALSO WITHDRAW MY OFFER OF A SEXUAL EXPERIENCE."

That'll teach me, Jake thought, raising one hand to cover a lingering smile. Aloud (and in what he hoped was a suitably humble tone of voice) he said: "That's okay, Blaine. I think I'm still a little young for that, anyway."

Susannah and Roland were looking at each other, eyes locked. Susannah couldn't know who Edith Bunker was, of course; All in the Family hadn't been on the tube in her when. But she grasped the essence of the situation, just the same; Jake saw her full lips form one soundless word and send it to the gunslinger like a message in a soapbubble:

Mistake.

Yes. Blaine had made a mistake. More, Jake Chambers, a boy of eleven, had picked up on it. And if Blaine had made one, he could make another. Maybe there was hope after all.

Jake decided he would treat that possibility as he had treated the graf of River Crossing and allow himself just a little.

Roland nodded imperceptibly at Susannah, then turned back to the front of the coach, presumably to resume riddling. Before he could open his mouth, Jake felt his body pushed forward. It was funny; you couldn't feel a thing when the mono was running flat-out, but the minute it began to decelerate, you knew.

"HERE IS SOMETHING YOU REALLY OUGHT TO SEE," Blaine said. He sounded cheerful again, but Jake wasn't sure he trusted that tone; he had sometimes heard his father start telephone conversations that way (usually with some subordinate who had FUB, Fucked Up Big) and by the end Elmer Chambers would be up on his feet, bent over the desk like he had a stomach cramp and screaming at the top of his lungs, his cheeks red as radishes and the circles of flesh under his eyes as purple as an eggplant. "I HAVE TO STOP HERE, ANYWAY, AS I MUST SWITCH TO BATTERY POWER AT THIS POINT AND THAT MEANS PRE-CHARGING."

Jake continued to sway forward as the mono slowed. It came to a final stop with a barely perceptible jerk. The walls around them once more drained of color and then became transparent. Susannah gasped with mingled fear and wonder. Roland moved to his left, felt for the side of the coach so he wouldn't bump his head, then leaned forward with his hands on his knees and his eyes narrowed. Oy began to bark again. Only Eddie seemed unmoved by the breathtaking view which had been provided them by the Barony Coach's visual mode. He glanced around once, face preoccupied and somehow bleary with thought, and then looked down at his hands again. Jake glanced at him with brief curiosity, then stared back out.

The mono had stopped halfway across a vast chasm, seeming to hover on moon-dusted thin air.

Beyond them, Jake could see a wide, boiling river. Not the Send, though, unless the rivers in Roland's world were somehow able to run in different directions at different points in their courses (and Jake didn't know enough about Mid-World to entirely discount that possibility); also, this river was not placid but raging, a torrent that came tumbling out of the mountains like something that was pissed off and wanted to brawl.

For a moment Jake looked at the trees which dressed the steep slopes along the sides of this river, registering with relief that they looked pretty much all right--the sort of firs you'd expect to see in the mountains of Colorado or Wyoming, say--and then his eyes were dragged back to the lip of the chasm. Here the torrent broke apart and dropped in a waterfall so wide and so deep that Jake thought it made Niagara, where he had gone with his parents (one of three family vacations he could remember; two of them had been cut short by urgent calls from his father's Network), look like the kind of man-made waterfall you might see in a third-rate theme-park. The air filling the enclosing semicircle of the falls was further thickened by an uprushing mist that looked like steam; in it half a dozen moonbows gleamed like gaudy, interlocking dream-jewelry. To Jake they looked like the overlapping rings which symbolized the Olympics.

Jutting from the center of the falls, perhaps two hundred feet below the point where the river actually went over the drop, were two enormous stone protrusions. Although Jake had no idea how a sculptor (or a team of them) could have gotten down to where they were, he found it all but impossible to believe they had simply eroded that way. They looked like the heads of enormous, snarling dogs.

The Falls of the Hounds, he thought. There was one more stop beyond this--Dasherville--and then Topeka. Last stop. Everybody out.

"ONE MOMENT," Blaine said. "I MUST ADJUST THE VOLUME FOR YOU TO ENJOY THE FULL EFFECT."

There was a brief, whispery, hooting sound--a kind of mechanical throat-clearing--and then they were assaulted by a vast and rumbling roar. It was water--a billion gallons a minute, for all Jake knew--pouring over the lip of the chasm and falling what could have been two thousand feet into the deep stone basin at the base of the falls. Streamers of mist floated past the blunt almost-faces of the jutting dogs like steam from the vents of hell. And still the level of sound went up . . . and up . . . and up. Now Jake's whole head vibrated with it, and as he clapped his hands over his ears, he saw Roland, Eddie, and Susannah doing the same. Oy was barking, but Jake couldn't hear him. Susannah's lips were moving again, and again he could read the words--Stop it, Blaine, stop it!--but he couldn't hear them any more than he could hear Oy's barks, although he was sure Susannah was screaming them at the top of her lungs.

And still Blaine increased the sound of the waterfall, until Jake could feel his eyes shaking in their sockets and he was sure his ears were just going to short out like a couple of overstressed stereo speakers.

Then, suddenly, it was gone. They still hung stopped above the moon-misty drop, the moonbows still made their slow and dreamlike revolutions before the curtain of endlessly falling water, the wet and brutal granite faces of the dogguardians continued to jut out of the torrent, but that world-ending thunder was gone.

For a moment Jake thought what he'd feared had happened, that he had gone deaf. Then he realized that he could still hear Oy barking, and that

Susannah was crying. At first these sounds seemed distant and flat, as if his ears had been packed with cracker-crumbs, but then they began to clarify.

Eddie put his arm around Susannah's shaking shoulders and looked toward the route-map. "Nice guy, Blaine."

"I MERELY THOUGHT YOU WOULD ENJOY HEARING THE SOUND OF THE FALLS AT FULL VOLUME," Blaine said. His booming voice sounded laughing and injured at the same time. "I THOUGHT IT MIGHT HELP YOU TO FORGET MY REGRETTABLE MISTAKE IN THE MATTER OF EDITH BUNKER."

My fault, Jake thought. Blaine may just be a machine, and a suicidal one at that, but he still doesn't like to be laughed at. My fault.

He sat down beside Susannah and put his own arm around her. He realized he could still hear The Falls of the Hounds, although the sound was now distant.

"What happens here?" Roland asked. "How do you charge your batteries?"

"YOU WILL SEE SHORTLY, GUNSLINGER. IN THE MEANTIME, TRY ME WITH A RIDDLE."

"All right, Blaine. Here's one of Cort's own making, and has posed many in its time."

"I AWAIT IT WITH GREAT INTEREST."

Roland, pausing perhaps to gather his thoughts, looked up at the place where the roof of the coach had been and where there was now only a starry spill across a black sky (Jake realized he

could pick out Aton and Lydia--Old Star and Old Mother--and was oddly comforted by the sight of them, still glaring at each other from their accustomed places). Then the gunslinger looked back at the lighted rectangle which served them as Blaine's face.

"We are very little creatures; all of us have different features. One of us in glass is set; one of us you'll find in jet. Another you may see in tin, and a fourth is boxed within. If the fifth you should pursue, it can never fly from you. What are we?"

"A AND E AND I AND O AND U," Blaine replied. "THE VOWELS OF THE HIGH SPEECH." Still no hesitation, damn him; not so much as a whit. Only that voice, mocking and just about two steps from laughter; the voice of a cruel little boy watching bugs run around on top of a hot stove, trying to find a way down before they catch fire. "ALTHOUGH THAT PARTICULAR RIDDLE IS NOT FROM YOUR TEACHER, ROLAND OF GILEAD; I KNOW IT FROM JONATHAN SWIFT OF LONDON--A CITY IN THE WORLD YOUR FRIENDS COME FROM."

"Thankee-sai," Roland said, and his sai sounded like a sigh. "Thankee-sai, Blaine, your answer is true, and undoubtedly what you believe of the riddle's origins is true, as well. That Cort knew of other worlds is something I long suspected. I think he may have held palaver with the manni who lived outside the city."

"I CARE NOT ABOUT THE MANNI, ROLAND OF GILEAD. THEY WERE ALWAYS A FOOLISH SECT. TRY ME WITH ANOTHER RIDDLE."

"All right. What has--"

"HOLD, HOLD. THE FORCE OF THE BEAM GATHERS. LOOK NOT DIRECTLY AT THE HOUNDS, MY INTERESTING NEW FRIENDS! AND SHIELD YOUR EYES!"

Jake looked away from the colossal rock sculptures jutting from the falls like figureheads, but didn't get his hand up quite in time. With his peripheral vision he saw those featureless heads suddenly develop eyes of a fiercely glowing blue. He saw jagged tines of lightning leap out of them and toward the mono, and then he was lying on the carpeted floor of the Barony Coach with the heels of his hands pasted against his closed eyes and the sound of Oy whining in one faintly ringing ear. Beyond Oy, he heard the crackle of electricity as it stormed around the mono.

When Jake opened his eyes again, The Falls of the Hounds were gone; Blaine had opaqued the cabin. He could still hear the sound, though--a waterfall of electricity, a force somehow drawn from the beam and shot out through the eyes of the stone dogs' heads. Blaine was sucking it in, somehow. Feeding himself with it. When we go on, Jake thought, he'll be running on batteries. Then Lud really will be behind us. For good.

"Blaine," Roland said. "How is the power of the beam stored in that place? What makes it come from the eyes of yon stone temple-dogs? How do you use it?"

Silence from Blaine.

"And who carved them?" Eddie asked. "Was it the Great Old Ones? It wasn't, was it? There were people even before them. Or . . . were they people?"

More silence from Blaine. And maybe that was good. Jake wasn't sure how much he wanted to know about The Falls of the Hounds, or what went on beneath them. He had been in the dark of Roland's world before, and had seen enough to believe that most of what was growing there was neither good nor safe.

"Better not to ask him"--the voice of Little Blaine drifted down from over their heads. "Safer not."

"Don't ask him silly questions, he won't play silly games," Eddie said. That distant, dreaming look had come onto his face again, and when Susannah spoke his name, he didn't seem to hear.

Roland sat down across from Jake and scrubbed his right hand slowly up the stubble on his right cheek, an unconscious gesture he seemed to make only when he was feeling tired or doubtful. "I'm running out of riddles," he said.

Jake looked back at him, wide-eyed and startled. The gunslinger had posed fifty or more to the computer, and Jake supposed that was a lot to just yank out of your head with no preparation, but still, when you considered that riddling had been such a big deal in the place where Roland had grown up . . .

Roland seemed to read some of this on Jake's face, for a small smile, lemon-bitter, touched the corners of his mouth, and he nodded as if the boy had spoken out loud. "I don't understand, either. If you'd asked me yesterday or the day before, I would have told you that I had at least a thousand riddles stored up in the junk-bin I keep at the back of my mind.

Perhaps two thousand. But now . . ."

He lifted one shoulder in a shrug, shook his head, rubbed his hand up his cheek again.

"It's not like forgetting," he said. "It's as if they were never there in the first place. What's happening to the rest of the world is happening to me, I reckon."

"You're moving on," Susannah said, and looked at Roland with an expression of pity which Roland could stand for only a second or two; it was as if he felt burned by her regard. "Losing your own

past."

"Yes, I fear so." He looked at Jake, lips tight, eyes sharp. "Will you be ready with the riddles from your book when I call on you?"

"Yes."

"Good. And take heart. We're not finished yet."

Outside, the dim crackle of electricity ceased.

"I HAVE FED MY BATTERIES AND ALL IS WELL," Blaine announced.

"Marvellous," Susannah said dryly.

"Luss!" Oy agreed, catching Susannah's sarcastic tone exactly.

"I HAVE A NUMBER OF SWITCHING FUNCTIONS TO PERFORM. THESE WILL TAKE ABOUT FORTY MINUTES AND ARE LARGELY AUTOMATIC. WHILE THIS SWITCHOVER TAKES PLACE AND THE ACCOMPANYING CHECKLIST IS RUNNING, WE SHALL CONTINUE OUR CONTEST. I AM ENJOYING IT VERY MUCH."

"It's like when you have to switch over from electric to diesel on the train to Boston," Eddie said. He still sounded as if he wasn't quite with them. "At Hartford or New Haven or one of those other places where no one in their right fucking mind would want to live."

"Eddie?" Susannah asked. "What are you--"

Roland touched her shoulder and shook his head.

"NEVER MIND EDDIE OF NEW YORK," Blaine said in his expansive, gosh-but-this-is-fun voice. "That's right," Eddie said. "Never mind Eddie of New York."

"HE KNOWS NO GOOD RIDDLES. BUT YOU KNOW MANY, ROLAND OF GILEAD. TRY ME WITH ANOTHER."

And, as Roland did just that, Jake thought of his Final Essay. Blaine is a pain, he had written there. Blaine is a pain and that is the truth. It was the truth, all right.

The stone truth.

A little less than an hour later, Blaine the Mono began to move again.

Susannah watched with a kind of dreadful fascination as the flashing dot approached Dasherville, passed it, and made its final dogleg for home.

The dot's movement said that Blaine was moving a bit more slowly now that it had switched over to battery power, and she fancied the lights in the Barony Coach were a little dimmer, but Susannah didn't believe it would make much difference, in the end. Blaine might reach his terminus in Topeka doing six hundred miles an hour instead of eight hundred, but his last load of passengers would be toothpaste either way.

Roland was also slowing down, she thought, going deeper and deeper into that mental junk-bin of his to find riddles. Yet he did find them, and he refused to give up. As always. Ever since he had begun teaching her to shoot, she had felt a strange, reluctant love for Roland of Gilead, a feeling that seemed composed chiefly of admiration, fear, and pity. She thought she would never really like him (and that the Detta Walker part of her might always hate him for the way he had seized hold of her and dragged her, raving, into the sun), but her love for him was nonetheless strong. He had, after all, saved Eddie Dean's life and soul; had rescued her beloved. She must love him for that, she supposed, if for nothing else. But she loved him even more, she suspected, for the way he would never, never give up. The word retreat did not seem to be in his vocabulary, even when he was discouraged . . . as he so clearly was now.

"Blaine, where may you find roads without carts, forests without trees, cities without houses?"

"ON A MAP."

"You say true, sai. Next. I have a hundred legs but cannot stand, a long neck but no head; I eat the maid's life. What am I?"

"A BROOM, GUNSLINGER. ANOTHER VARIATION ENDS, `I EASE THE MAID'S LIFE.' I LIKE YOURS BETTER."

Roland ignored this. "Cannot be seen, cannot be felt, cannot be heard, cannot be smelt. It lies behind the stars and beneath the hills. Ends life and kills laughter. What is it, Blaine?"

"THE DARK."

"Thankee-sai, you speak true."

The diminished right hand slid up the right cheek--the old fretful gesture--and the minute scratching sound produced by the callused pads of his fingers made Susannah feel like shivering. Jake sat crosslegged on the floor, looking at the gunslinger with a kind of fierce intensity, as if willing Roland to ask the right, the unanswerable, question.

"This thing runs but cannot walk, sometimes sings but never talks. Lacks arms, has hands; lacks a head but has a face. What is it, Blaine?"

"A CLOCK."

"Shit," Jake whispered, lips compressing.

Susannah looked over at Eddie and felt a passing ripple of irritation. He seemed to have lost interest in the whole thing--had "zoned out," in his peculiar nineteen-eighties slang. She thought to throw an elbow into his side, wake him up a little, then remembered Roland shaking his head at her and didn't. You wouldn't know he was thinking, not from that slack expression on his face, but maybe he was.

If so, you'd better hurry the process up a little, precious, she thought. The dot on the route-map was still closer to Dasherville than to Topeka, but it would reach the halfway point within the next fifteen minutes or so.

And still the match went on, Roland serving questions, Blaine sending the answers whistling right back at him, low over the net and out of reach.

What builds up castles, tears down mountains, makes some blind, helps others to see? SAND.
Thankee-sai.

What lives in winter, dies in summer, and grows with its roots upward? AN ICICLE.
Blaine, you say true.

Man walks over; man walks under; in time of war he burns asunder? A BRIDGE.
Thankee-sai.

A seemingly endless parade of riddles marched past her, one after the other, until she lost all sense of their fun and playfulness. Had it been so in the days of Roland's youth, she wondered, during the riddle contests of Wide Earth and Full Earth, when he and his friends (although she had an idea they hadn't all been his friends, no, not by a long chalk) had vied for the Fair-Day goose? She guessed that the answer was probably yes. The winner had perhaps been the one who could stay fresh the longest, keep his poor bludgeoned brains aerated, somehow.

The killer was the way Blaine came back with the answer so damned promptly each time. No matter how hard the riddle might seem to her, Blaine served it right back to their side of the court, ka-slam.

"Blaine, what has eyes yet cannot see?"

"THERE ARE FOUR ANSWERS," Blaine replied. "NEEDLES, STORMS, POTATOES, AND A TRUE LOVER."

"Thankee-sai, Blaine, you speak--"

"LISTEN, ROLAND OF GILEAD. LISTEN, KA-TET." Roland fell silent at once, his eyes narrowing, his head slightly cocked.

"YOU WILL SHORTLY HEAR MY ENGINES BEGIN TO CYCLE UP," Blaine said. "WE ARE NOW EXACTLY SIXTY MINUTES OUT OF TOPEKA. AT THIS POINT--"

"If we've been riding for seven hours or more, I grew up with The Brady Bunch," Jake said.

Susannah looked around apprehensively, expecting some new terror or small act of cruelty in response to Jake's sarcasm, but Blaine only chuckled. When he spoke again, the voice of Humphrey Bogart had resurfaced.

"TIME'S DIFFERENT HERE, SHWEETHEART. YOU MUST KNOW THAT BY NOW. BUT DON'T WORRY; THE FUNDAMENTAL THINGS APPLY AS TIME GOES BY. WOULD I LIE TO YOU?"

"Yes," Jake muttered.

That apparently struck Blaine's funnybone, because he began to laugh again--that mad, mechanical laughter that made Susannah think of funhouses in sleazy amusement parks and roadside carnivals. When the lights began to pulse in sync with the laughter, she shut her eyes and put her hands over her ears.

"Stop it, Blaine! Stop it!"

"BEG PARDON, MA'AM," drawled the aw-shucks voice of Jimmy Stewart. "AH'M RIGHT SORRY IF I RUINED YOUR EARS WITH MY RISIBILITY."

"Ruin this," Jake said, and hoisted his middle finger at the route-map.

Susannah expected Eddie to laugh--you could count on him to be amused by vulgarity at any time of the day or night, she would have said--but Eddie only continued looking down at his lap, his forehead creased in a faint frown, his eyes vacant, his mouth hung slightly agape. He looked a little too much like the village idiot for comfort, Susannah thought, and again had to restrain herself from throwing an elbow into his side to get that doltish look off his face. She wouldn't restrain herself for much longer; if they were going to die at the end of Blaine's run, she wanted Eddie's arms around her when it happened, Eddie's eyes on her, Eddie's mind with hers.

But for the time being, she decided, better let him be.

"AT THIS POINT," Blaine resumed in his normal voice, "I INTEND TO BEGIN WHAT I LIKE TO THINK OF AS MY KAMIKAZE RUN. THIS WILL DRAIN MY BATTERIES IN SHORT ORDER, BUT I RATHER THINK THE TIME FOR CONSERVATION HAS PASSED, DON'T YOU? WHEN I STRIKE THE TRANSTEEL PIERS AT THE END OF THE TRACK, I SHOULD BE TRAVELLING AT BETTER THAN NINE HUNDRED MILES AN HOUR--FIVE HUNDRED AND THIRTY IN WHEELS, THAT IS. SEE YOU LATER,

ALLIGATOR, AFTER AWHILE, CROCODILE, DON'T FORGET TO WRITE. I TELL YOU THIS IN THE SPIRIT OF FAIR PLAY, MY INTERESTING NEW FRIENDS. IF YOU HAVE BEEN SAVING YOUR BEST RIDDLES FOR LAST, YOU MIGHT DO WELL TO POSE THEM TO ME NOW."

The unmistakable greed in the machine's voice--its naked desire to hear and solve their best riddles before it killed them--made Susannah feel tired and old.

"I might not have time, even so, to pose you all my very best ones," Roland said in a casual, considering tone of voice. "That would be a shame, wouldn't it?"

A pause ensued--brief, but more of a hesitation than the computer had accorded any of Roland's riddles--and then Blaine chuckled. Susannah hated the sound of its mad laughter, but there was a cynical weariness in this chuckle that somehow chilled her even more deeply. Perhaps because it was almost sane.

"GOOD, GUNSLINGER. A VALIANT EFFORT. BUT YOU ARE NOT SCHEHERAZADE, NOR DO WE HAVE A THOUSAND AND ONE NIGHTS IN WHICH TO HOLD PALAVER."

"I don't understand you. I know not this Scheherazade."

"NO MATTER. SUSANNAH CAN TELL YOU, IF YOU REALLY WANT TO KNOW. PERHAPS EVEN EDDIE, ALTHOUGH I AM AFRAID HE HAS PROVEN SOMETHING OF A DULLARD. THE POINT, ROLAND OF GILEAD, IS THAT I WILL NOT BE DRAWN ON BY THE PROMISE OF MORE RIDDLES. WE VIE FOR THE GOOSE. COME TOPEKA, IT SHALL BE AWARDED, ONE WAY OR ANOTHER. DO YOU UNDERSTAND THAT?"

Once more the diminished hand went up Roland's cheek; once more Susannah heard the minute rasp of his fingers against the wiry stubble of his beard.

"We play for keeps."

"YES."

"No one cries off."

"NO ONE."

"All right, Blaine, gods damn you. We play for keeps and no one cries off. Here's the next."

"AS ALWAYS, I AWAIT IT WITH PLEASURE."

Roland looked down at Jake. "Be ready with yours, Jake; I'm almost at the end of mine."

Jake nodded.

"GUNSLINGER?"

"I'm here," Roland said. Beneath them, the mono's slo-trans engines continued to cycle up--that beat-beat-beat which Susannah did not so much hear as feel in the hinges of her jaw, the hollows of her temples, the pulse-points of her wrists.

It's not going to happen unless there's a stumper in Jake's book, she thought. Roland can't pose Blaine, and I think he knows it. I think he knew it an hour ago.

"Blaine, I occur once in a minute, twice in every moment, but not once in a hundred thousand years. What am I?"

And so, Susannah thought, the contest would likely continue, Roland asking and Blaine answering with his increasingly terrible lack of hesitation, like an all-seeing, all-knowing god. Susannah sat with her cold hands clasped in her lap and watched the glowing dot draw nigh Topeka, the place where all rail service ended, the place where the path of their ka-tet would end in the clearing. She thought about The Hounds of the Falls, how they had jutted from the thundering white billows below the dark and starshot sky; she thought of their eyes.

Their electric-blue eyes.